No Gods, No Masters

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No Gods, No Masters

by Kanagen

Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people, but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter 1: Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

This story was originally posted on another website, and is now archived here on AO3. It's part of a shared universe based on GlitchyRobo's fic "Human Domestication Guide," which is in short about a benevolent species of all-powerful plant aliens called the Affini subjugating humanity for its own good, with very kinky results. "No Gods, No Masters" is a novel length work set in that universe, focusing on a band of insurrectionary leftists who overthrew the prison-colony government of a planet on the periphery of the Terran Accord.

If you'd like to know more about the setting, or chat with authors (such as yours truly) or other folks interested in the big gay plants, come and check out the HDG Community Discord, or the all-new HDG Guide!

All other chapter notes from here on out are, more or less, preserved from their original context as I wrote this story in obsessive burst over the autumn of 2022.

After like five drafts, a massive outline, and a whole lot of stressing over it, here is the first chapter of a story about a very tired anarchist arguing with other leftists, the Affini, and also herself.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Trish shook her awake in the dead, cold hours of the early morning, Cass Hope was dreaming of the end of the world. She could feel the puddlejumper's controls rocking angrily in her hands as she fought to maintain control, could see the horizon bleaching under whiter light than she'd ever seen before, could hear the shriek of a dozen alarms filling the cockpit with unholy clamor, the digital voice calmly demanding that she PULL UP, PULL UP, PULL UP. She remembered the last coherent thought she'd had in the instant before she somehow managed to safely bring the little aircraft in for a rough but survivable landing on a suitably flat patch of ground, the last thought she'd had in the instant before she knew she'd survived: "He who cuts off twenty years of life, cuts off so many years of fearing death."

She had stared death in the face, triumphed against all odds, and all she'd had in her mind was *Julius* fucking *Caesar*. She'd laughed about it, later, but at the time, still squinting against the second sunrise, she'd briefly regretted the Shakespeare obsession that had devoured most of her fourth year on Solstice. She could have learned so much more, so much that would have been useful in the world to come after the Pillar of Fire. But the dream slipped away as the cold bit down on her senses, and thoughts of the Bard and could-have-beens quickly followed suit.

She came to wakefulness with a hand on her knife – old instincts died hard – but stayed the reflex as her eyes fixed on Trish's lean, sharp-edged face. Not that anyone carried much extra fat on them these days. Her cheeks and nose were red from the chill in the air.

"Radar return," Trish said quietly, not wanting to wake the others sleeping just a few feet away on cots of their own. Communal sleeping kept body heat in one room rather than spreading it out throughout the bunker, which made it possible to forego heating, which meant more power could be reserved for operating the radar array and other essentials. The solar array wasn't as efficient as it could be, with all the dust still drifting in the upper atmosphere, and the less fuel they burned to power the generators, the longer that fuel would last. "Blaine says it's definitely not a meteor this time, it's maneuvering."

"Wonderful," Cass grunted as she swung her legs out from under the too-thin blanket. She tested her knees for a moment before she stood, holding back the wince as her left knee complained. She had no idea when she'd injured it, but now it ached in cold weather – which meant it ached a minimum of nine months out of the year. Maybe it wasn't an injury, but just age catching up with her. She'd been fortunate to land a safe job in the Archives and hold it for twenty years, but time was time, and she was well into her forties already. At this point, age or injury made little difference – her knee just hurt. "What time is it?"

"About 0430," Trish replied, and Cass felt the weight on her shoulders spread throughout her body like ink in water. She'd been asleep for about three hours, tops – she'd been up well after her theoretical rack-out time helping Nell balance the consumables stockpile, helping Simon with generator maintenance, and teaching several of the young new grunts transferred into Bulwark the finer points of why keeping one's rifle clean was not a sometimes job.

Could others have done it? Probably. Could they do it as well as her? Possibly. Did it matter? Not particularly – she was the Captain. All that, and being woken up at 0430 besides, was what she'd volunteered for. She was cold, tired, and miserable, and given the opportunity she'd make the same choice every time. "Okay," she said, "wake up Niko and Nell, then go unlock the armory and start getting kits ready. If they hit the ground running, we need to be ready for them." Trish nodded and slipped off into the shadows.

Three years, eight months, and sixteen days. That was the last time the Accord had shown their face in-system, when they killed half of Solstice's population with a single shot. For good measure, they'd taken out the meager satellite network in orbit before they fled back into the void. Now, all the survivors had left to spot an approach was a peripheral radar installation, one of the few remaining pieces of flight-control infrastructure that had survived the Pillar of Fire. Still, it was placed well enough to survey the coastline and the open sea, meaning it had enough range to give warning. Now, at long last, it had served its purpose.

Tucking her long, black hair under a knit cap, Cass marched, ignoring the pain every other step, as she ascended the metal stairs up to the observation tower – the battered upper story of the bunker, where the repeater displays were set up along with a commanding view in all directions. The moons cast little enough light, but the room was dark and the displays dimmed to conserve power, and Cass's eyes were already accustomed to the night from sleep. She could see the bay below, the mountains following the coastline in the distance to where Landfall had once stood. Dead trees, their branches reaching up in the night sky as if pleading

for mercy from uncaring gods, were limned in snow that caught what little light there was. It made them look even more like bones than they did in the daylight.

“What do we have?” she said, leaning over the skinny boy’s shoulder. Boy was the wrong word, he was getting into his mid-20s now, but when Cass looked at him she couldn’t help but see the terrified 18 year old he’d been when he’d arrived. Solstice would have chewed him up and spat him out in months if she hadn’t taken him under her wing, like she’d done so for many others.

He looked back over his shoulder. Red hair poked out from under his toque cap, and all the heavy coats he wore couldn’t hide the shiver. Sitting up, sitting still – it let the cold in. “I think it’s a shuttle. Just the one, ma’am,” he said.

Part of her wanted to remind the kid that they weren’t doing that regressive yes-sir-no-sir bullshit and they hadn’t been for years, but it wasn’t the time. “Just the one? That’s awfully cocky of them.” If they were sending down a single shuttle, they were probably offering the carrot before they showed the stick. *We lost a lot of good people in the war,* they’d say, *and we need you*. Pardons would be offered, deals would be signed, smiles all around – and then back into the meat grinder they’d go again, all promises forgotten. She knew better than to trust the Accord, and so did her people, she hoped.

“It’s an odd return, though,” Blaine went on. “It doesn’t match any of the signatures we have on file from traffic control.”

“Maybe it’s something new,” Cass replied as she reached for the binoculars sitting on the console and held them to her eyes, scanning the sky. It was a clear night, and visibility was good. “Or something old they dug out of mothballs for the war. Maybe it’s private, and they’re trying to claimjump. Who knows, maybe O-C sold the rights to this shithole. Ah! Found them. Orbital contact, ten o’clock high.” She’d picked out the little moving star as it drifted toward the horizon, the hull of the ship catching the sidereal light of a dawn yet to come. Funny – to be that bright, it would have to be in a fairly low orbit, but it was moving too slow for that. Maybe it was still decelerating, and she was seeing fusion engine wash – had the shuttle launched before they’d made orbit, and made a hard reentry over the horizon?

“You think there’s going to be fighting?”

The shiver in his voice wasn’t just from the cold. Cass had been around people long enough to work out the sounds they made when they were uneasy, or upset, or afraid. Blaine’s eyes, when she gave them a quick glance, said afraid. Fear wasn’t the worst thing in the world, so long as it was kept in check with confidence. She lifted a hand and set it down on his shoulder. To him, as it would be to most, it’d be a comfort. “There might be. If there is, just stick close to me, alright?”

“Okay,” he said. There, he didn’t sound as bad. Still sounded cold, though.

“Go tell Nell and Niko to wake everyone up, then help Trish out in the armory. I’ll take watch here for now.”

“Yes, ma’am!” he said, getting shakily to his feet and clumping down the stairs, sending metallic twangs through the night air. She sat in his place (there went the knee, again), and began trading glances between the repeaters and the sky. Only a few hundred kilometers now. *Lazy flying*, she thought. *If they wanted, they could be here by now*. *Why a hard reentry if you’re going to fly like that?*

“And bring me up a carbine!” she shouted after Blaine. Damned if she was going to meet the enemy unarmed. This was the nightmare scenario she’d been living with ever since the Pillar of Fire. She didn’t want to think that she’d fought so hard to keep so many alive only for them to die in a hopeless fight, but they were too cold, too hungry, too tired to hold off the Cosmic Navy for long. Even that assumed they’d make a ground slog out of it instead of simply wiping them out from orbit, they way they’d tried before. It wouldn’t be much of a fight either way.

But fight she would. She’d die before she saw a single one of her people forced back into that hellish machine again.

“Look at that crater!” Pisca said as she pressed her eyes to the viewport and pointed at the shattered ring of isles below. They’d clearly been part of a peninsula not too long ago – even through the snow, the sharp edges and harsh rifts where the crater met land were in clear evidence. Something had hit this planet very, very hard, and recently. “How old do you think it is?”

“No more than a couple of years,” Tsuga said. Their eyes stayed on the display in front of them, and their vines on the controls – the weather was poor enough, and the environment inhospitable enough, that they wanted to be ready in the extremely unlikely event that the autonavigation systems failed. “High velocity, high angle of impact.”

“You must have seen one or two like it before, then? To be able to say that so readily, with just a glance at it, I mean.” Polyphylla said, peering past Pisca.

“One or two, yes,” Tsuga said, keeping their voice even. They did *not* want to talk about what had most likely caused the crater, and wanted even less to think about why they were able to recognize it so readily. With luck, they could guide the shuttle down to the frostbitten little sophonts below, gather them up, and retreat into the sky. They could provide details on what the humans needed, where all their settlements were (and not just the ones that showed up well on infrared, or who were broadcasting EM radiation at them). These sophonts would be taken care of, as they deserved to be, and as their former masters had utterly failed to do. Then, Tsuga could go back to their studies, all without having to explain the crater’s provenance to their colleagues.

And they would never have to look at this horrible, horrible scar on the world’s surface again.

“Twenty klicks,” Cass announced. Zodiacal light was casting a strange sheen on the snow, and at altitude the shuttle reflected the dawn’s first rays quite brightly. If the Accord was trying to make some kind of sneaky dawn raid happen, they were doing a pisspoor job of it. “Remember, no shooting. Not until we have a reason to, anyway,” she added. This was their

first opportunity for any kind of intel in years, and even if it came from the mouths of capital's running dogs, the Cosmic Navy, truth might yet be gleaned even from baldfaced lies.

And yet, as the shuttle drew closer, becoming more than a point of light in her binoculars, something began to bother Cass. It took a long moment for her to realize what, squinting at the resolving shape and trying to figure out what odd orientation the shuttle was flying at, until at last the image snapped into crystal clarity and she realized what she was looking at.

That isn't an Accord shuttle, she thought. She had obsessively read through all the catalogues when she'd worked the Archives at O-C Admin, virtually every kind of starship and shuttle all the way back to the first tin cans humans had shot into space 500 years ago. She knew far too much about all of them, useless information she'd never need but that felt utterly *delicious* in the learning. This shuttle wasn't like any of those. This was not a nimble Egret-class, nor was it a heavily-armored Valley Forge, nor was it even a strange art-deco antique like the Chevalier.

That can't be a Terran shuttle at all, she thought, as ridiculous as the thought felt. Nor was it Rinan – it was far too streamlined, far too *safe*-looking, to be anything a Rinan built – which left the last option still on the table.

This was a shuttle belonging to the third xenos, the ones that the Accord had gone to war with – not genocide and unopposed conquest like with the Rinans, but actual *war*. That war had given the prisoners on Solstice the opportunity that Cass had been waiting half her life for. When the Cosmic Navy's watchfleet had left, O-C was left without backup and orbital weaponry, and the prisoners finally, blessedly fought back, organized and ready. They'd torn down the suits and the screws in a few short months. What became of the war after that, they knew nothing – when, their loss inevitable, the O-C higher-ups had fled, they'd spiked the hypermetric relay antenna, cutting Solstice off from the rest of the galaxy. All they really knew about the xenos was that, unlike the Rinans, they were more than able to defend themselves.

And now they were here. The silvery, oblate disc swept down almost noiselessly, its underside glowing an uncanny blue-violet, its landing struts emerging seemingly from nowhere as it settled to the snow-covered tarmac. The snow itself began to melt away almost immediately, revealing the blacktop, and even from fifty meters Cass thought she could feel heat pouring from the thing.

The door that opened in the side, and the gangway that extended down, looked disappointingly normal next to the alien lines of the shuttle's exterior. That disappointment faded when the xeno emerged shortly thereafter, an incongruous shape that seemed to flow out of the hatch and take on the shape of a biped taking step by careful step down to the tarmac. In the early morning light, it was more silhouette than anything, long of limb, its edges strangely fuzzy. Only its eyes stood out, like two glittering pieces of metal that caught the light at every angle.

It stood there for a moment, just *looking* out at the humans clustered around the makeshift barricades around the bunker, and then it began to move again. As it came closer, details resolved themselves – the xeno was made of wood, or vines, or maybe both, with foliage interwoven between it all and creeping up its head like some strange parody of hair. Each step

it took was deliberate, long and steady, speaking to the power bound up in the creature's alien but oddly feminine form.

And then it passed by the long-empty fuel tank by the side of the landing pad, and the scale of the thing slammed into Cass's mind like a blow to the gut. *Stars,* she thought*, that thing must be three-and-a half meters tall, easy!* She could feel the tension rising all around her, and with a quick glance back at her people she saw everything she needed to, long years of studying others giving her an early warning someone else might have missed. One by one, they looked to her for guidance, as they always seemed to. Terror would sweep through them soon. Someone would do something stupid, if she didn't give them a reason to believe she could handle this. This wasn't something she'd planned for – she figured it'd be the Accord invading – and she felt tightness in her shoulders as she fought against the familiar frustration of not having a plan. Still, it wasn't *that* different, she told herself. First, a joke, to break the tension. She rifled through the deep troves of her memory and found the perfect one in record time.

"Well," she said, putting a measure of mirth into her voice as she slung her carbine onto her shoulder and stood up. "I guess we finally know where the Ent-wives went."

Silence, save for the alien's footballs on snow and blacktop. No one laughed. "What the *fuck* is an entwive*?*" Nell stage-whispered. She hadn't taken her eyes off the alien, which was still approaching, undaunted.

"Ent. Wife. From *Lord of the–* Never mind, I'll tell you later. Stay here. I'm going to go talk to it." Her cheeks burned as she stepped forward. She'd meet the xeno, if not halfway, at least a fair way ahead of her comrades. *Yes, make a joke about an obscure 500 year old early Aerospace Era novel that no one on the planet but you has read*, she thought to herself. *That was a great idea*. *More like that in the future*.

Still, perhaps it was for the best. Now that she'd gotten it started, her brain was trawling up even more asinine Old-World media references, but her mouth was paralyzed by the mortifying knowledge that no one had got her joke, so she didn't say anything before the alien came to a halt in front of her, just a little too close. She had to crane her neck upward just to look her in the strange, metallic eyes.

(We came in peace for all mankind? No, no, they're the ones coming here, that doesn't work.)

Something shifted in the alien's face. Cass didn't recognize the gesture at first, but when the alien spoke, its– no, *her* gentle voice laden with strange, almost musical undertones, it clicked: the xeno was smiling at her.

"Hello there, little one," the xeno said. The intonation wasn't quite right, and the cadence was all over the map, like she was singing along to a beat only she could hear, but she was entirely understandable.

(*To go where no one has gone before? Same problem. Try again!*)

"My name is Tsuga Sequi, Eighth Bloom, and my–" She paused, and muttered something in an even more lyrical language. "Well, we'll worry about the pronouns later," she continued.

“I still haven’t fully internalized your species’ schema. Anything will do for now.”

(*Klaatu barada nikto? No, she’s not even a robot. You know what? Just stop trying. You’re not helping.*)

“…are you alright?” Tsuga said, leaning down to peer at Cass and lifting one of her massive hands. “Perhaps you ought to give me that weapon. You seem a bit out of sorts.”

That, if nothing else, shocked Cass out of her thought loop. The eyes had been drawing her in, like the colors rippling across their surface possessed a gravity all their own. “No. No, I’ll keep it, thanks.”

“It really isn’t necessary,” Tsuga went on. “And I worry you’re going to hurt yourself.”

“It’s slung, the safety’s on, and to be perfectly honest I forgot to chamber a round before I came out here,” Cass said, closing her eyes and focusing on her own thoughts. *Why did you tell her that? Ugh! You’re flustered. Breathe in. Breathe out. Everyone’s counting on you, so be the you they know. Now more than ever, they need you to be that Cass.* And so she squared her shoulders, opened her eyes, and ignoring the tightening feeling in her chest as she thrust out an open hand. “Cassandra Hope. Call me Cass. You’re clearly here to talk, so let’s talk.”

The alien hesitated for a brief moment before delicately taking Cass’s hand in her own. The fingers easily enclosed her entire hand and half of her forearm. Despite the strength Cass could feel beneath the lightly textured vines, the grip was feather-light, gentle. “Very nice to meet you, Cass. And I would very much like to speak with you, and all your packmates. Might we do so indoors? I should think it would be warmer there, and you wouldn’t have to shiver so.” She still hadn’t let go of Cass’ hand.

“I…think we can manage that,” Cass said. “You might be a little uncomfortable, though, the ceilings are– well, you’re *really* tall.”

“Are you sure you aren’t just very short?” Tsuga replied. There came that smile again, with a soft chuckle hiding behind it. “I take your meaning – the structure is built for your needs, not mine. But don’t worry about me, little one. I’m very flexible, as are my associates.”

“…right.” She glanced at her hand, still held firmly but ever-so-gently in Tsuga’s fingers. “This is, uhm, usually the part of the handshake where you let go.”

“If it’ll get you all inside before you get hypothermic, I suppose it’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make,” Tsuga said, her fingers slowly uncoiling and releasing Cass’s hand. “Please, lead the way. My colleagues will be right behind me.” She turned, and made a languid and all-too-human beckoning gesture towards the shuttle. Two more of the aliens emerged. One looked much like Tsuga, but smaller, with sharp-edged fronds and needles coiling around its limbs – it moved with a spring in its step, an almost innocent glee. The other scarcely resembled the other two at all, a knot of ever-shifting vines and leaves that shuffled along, clutching at something glowing a warm shade of orange-red at the mass’s center.

It took Cass a moment to stop staring – something about the other two seemed to draw her in, like Tsuga’s eyes had before. “Right,” she said, turning and raising her voice. “Okay,

everyone back inside, on the double! Get the secondary generator started, I want lighting and heating up in five. Let everyone know we've got xenos coming in, to *talk.* I don't want to hear any gunshots. And get some tea on!" When no one moved, she added, "What are you waiting for? Let's *go*, folks!"

Most of them listened this time, standing up shivering from behind the barricades, slinging their weapons over their shoulder, and filing back into the bunker. Nell and Nikolai, though, stayed standing, and Nikolai hadn't even stowed his rifle.

Cass quashed the sigh – it'd be visible, and she didn't need to make things worse. "Give me a moment, I need to discuss some logistical things with my people. You go ahead in."

"Don't dawdle too long out here, little one," Tsuga said, patting Cass affectionately on the shoulder as she passed. It took every ounce of willpower Cass had not to recoil from the sudden touch, but she still clenched her teeth as the unwelcome sensation rolled across her shoulders and up her neck. In a few long strides, Tsuga reached the door and seemed to fold in on herself, bending in ways that'd snap a human's back and pulling herself in one long limb at a time. The sprightly one followed not long thereafter, needing only to duck a little to pass through the door. The shivering mass of plant matter took a little longer to shuffle over to the entrance, and passed through it like fluid vanishing down a drain.

Nell didn't bother waiting for Cass to ask her what was wrong. "You're just *letting them in*?" For all she was a tiny, pale slip of a woman, Nell had more fire in her belly than most people Cass had ever met, and she wasn't shy about letting it show. The two of them butted heads regularly, and not just over questions of ideology. On the other hand, she was spectacularly competent at her work – without her as quartermaster, they'd probably have all starved long ago.

"I don't think they like the cold any more than we do," Cass said, shrugging. "Besides, what are we going to do, shoot them? Do *you* know where they keep the heart, or brain, or whatever plant version of those things they have? And what do we get even if we *do* kill them? A shuttle none of us know how to fly?"

"We keep them out of Bulwark!" Nell spat. "You're compromising our entire security setup!"

"They're here to talk, not invade," Cass said, keeping her voice measured, calm. "And diplomatic contact and negotiation is part of our commission, too. Besides, they're aligned against the Accord, right? I'd rather not alienate potential allies by shooting on sight."

"*Alien* is the right word," Nikolai grumbled, watching the entrance to the bunker with obvious unease. He was practically Nell's opposite, about as tall as Cass – though she'd quit testosterone when she was even younger than he was, and even malnutrition hadn't slimmed down his shoulders. "Right before you all took over, I starting hearing things," he went on. "I didn't spread it around after the revolt, we all had enough problems to worry about without rumors running wild. But now they're here." He tugged his scarf down and scratched at this thick, dark beard. "Starting to think maybe I *should* have said something."

"What do you know?" Cass trusted Nikolai well enough, even if he'd been one of O-M's guards before the revolution, and even if his politics were at best flaccid and at worst

atrocious, borderline fascist. He'd stayed behind (or been left behind – it wasn't completely clear), and had been imprisoned as a potential counterrevolutionary element by the interim government. It was only after the Pillar of Fire, when they needed every able hand to work for survival, that the prisoners been set free. Not all of them had worked out – many presented ongoing problems for the communities they lived in – but Nikolai had, enough to be stationed at Bulwark, and he'd proven himself time and again. He was young enough to change his ways, and Cass had spent no small amount of time encouraging it over the last few years.

"I don't *know* anything but what I heard, the last few days before the suits ran upwell," he said. "They call themselves Affini, and they're a slaver empire. Supposedly, they gather up other species, then turn them loose in batches on an undeveloped world to hunt them. The ones that live, they cut them open, put a worm in their brain to control their thoughts, breed them to start the cycle over again, and send them to work until they drop dead when they're not good for that anymore. The ones that don't live, well, waste not want not – they *eat* them."

"That's… a lot," Cass said, staring off at a tree in the distance as she turned it all over in her mind. It sounded too ridiculous to possibly be true when it was said all at once – but then again, she had grown up in the belly of an economic engine that brutalized and starved its own people, and which saturated their minds with propaganda to make them feel like they were mentally ill or morally compromised (or both) if they expressed any dissent, all for the sake of further enriching a scarce few at the top of the economic pyramid who already possessed wealth beyond the dreams of avarice. And that was *before* she'd been convicted of crimes against capital and sentenced to transportation to Solstice on a fourteen-year indenture contract that was now over twenty years old. If someone described the Terran Accord to aliens in those terms before the Cosmic Navy showed up, the aliens probably wouldn't find such monstrousness believable, either.

"Don't forget the sleeper agents," Nell said, elbowing Nikolai. Of course he'd told her – they were bizarrely inseparable for a Leninist and a liberal, though they fought even more than Nell and Cass did.

"Mmm. Some of the worm-heads, they send them out on Terran ships as sleeper agents," he went on. "Undermine morale, sabotage, recruit others, that sort of thing." He shrugged. "Didn't see any Terrans with them, though, and it's not like we get a lot of traffic these days."

"They could have dropped them off somewhere out of our radar range," Nell insisted. "We're still finding isolated groups of survivors here and there – it's not implausible for them to have sleepers already here at Bulwark!"

"Well, I don't like *that* idea," Cass admitted. It was unlikely, but still possible, and if it posed a security risk to her people…

"We should start doing neck-checks. Nikolai said it leaves a scar back there, when they put the worms in."

"Good idea," Nikolai agreed.

“Well, keep it subtle,” Cass said. “I don’t want us to have a panic on our hands. Ones and twos, quietly. We don’t know how much of that is true and how much of it is recycled nonsense from algorithmic horror movies.”

“I still think letting them in was a terrible idea,” Nell said. She was grinding her teeth, and her left hand was clenched into a tight fist. “If even *half* of it is true…”

“Hey!” Cass leaned in and forced herself to look Nell in the eye – it was one of the only reliable ways to stop her before she built up steam and went on a tear. Cass had been here before. What Nell needed now was structure and reassurance, so she repeated the gesture she’d used on Blaine before, a hand on the shoulder. It seemed to work. “Keep your head on straight, alright? Right now, we don’t even know what we don’t know. We need to learn. Know your enemy, know yourself, and you will not be imperiled in a thousand battles. Right?”

“… you and your fucking quotes, Cass,” she said, but the ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “Alright. Put that thing up, Niko, and let’s go. We’ve left them in there too long already.” She and Nikolai walked away, and Cass made to follow them, but paused for a moment at the threshold as they descended. A bothersome feeling was rising in her gut, a childish and ridiculous one she shouldn’t be entertaining. She had more than ten years on Nell, *twenty* on Nikolai; she should know better than to let gossip get inside her head and start twisting up her thoughts so easily. Still, the feeling wouldn’t go away – not until she was sure. There was no one to see out here, anyway. She tugged her scarf loose, pulled the glove from her right hand, and began to feel around at the back of her neck.

Nothing new. Smooth, and unscarred.

Breathing a sigh of relief that formed a cloudbank around her face for a brief moment, she finally stepped inside and shut the door behind her.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed 5000 words of setup. Next time: arguing, but productively.

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

In which three Affini are baffled by terrans, but it's okay: the terrans are still cute.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The little terran had said the ceilings would be low, but Tsuga had not expected precisely just how low was meant by *low*. At first, they'd tried to hunch over; then, they'd squatted down, and even that hadn't given them the clearance to squeeze into the concrete structure the terrans had made their nest in. Finally, they'd given up the pretense of maintaining a terranoid shape and broken themself down into a broader, less compacted form, their limbs sprawling out far enough to almost bridge the whole of the room. The terrans were already giving them so much space, and backed away even more as they gave up even trying to look like them.

Poor things, they thought. *I wonder why that frightens them so?* "Don't worry, little terrans," they said, shifting herself along the room's perimeter bit by bit. "I'm just making it a bit easier for me to move around in here." Not that it had helped much – uncompacted, they took up far more space than they did before, and terrans' nest was as disordered as it was tiny. Things were strewn everywhere, and the room was filled with cots and bedding that the humans were shoving out of the way. In the corner, an electric coil was giving off an ozone scent as it heated a carafe of water, a scent that competed with the terran-smell that saturated the place.

It reminded Tsuga, painfully, of another place and time. This planet was getting worse by the minute.

<Ohhh *dirt*, it's cold out there!> Pisca, ducking over to fit in the terrans' nest, barely had time to clear the entryway before Polyphylla rushed inside, utterly shapeless, and set the space heater she was carrying down on the floor. "Oh, hello everyone!" she added cheerfully so the terrans scattering away could understand. "Excuse me for just a moment." She slowly coiled herself back into a humanlike shape – one much more humanlike than Tsuga had yet managed, but then, Phylla *was* the specialist on this particular sophont species. "Mmmm, there we go," she said, smiling with her immaculately detailed face. She shook her head

gently, and a carpet of brilliant red flowers bloomed like a crimson waterfall, a stunning mimicry of the terrans' head-fur. "Does that help you feel a little more at ease?"

None of the terrans answered her.

"Hello? Cuties?" Pisca waved a hand. <Did we learn the wrong language?>

<No,> Polyphylla said, looking back over her shoulder at Pisca and Tsuga, who was mostly sticking to the fringes of the room. <Tsuga was able to converse with the pack alpha. I think they're just unsettled. They probably weren't expecting us, and if the Office of Transitional Neoxenoveterinary Archeoburaucracy's preliminary profile on this place is correct, there isn't any record of a ship coming here for several years.>

<Weird. That's about how old Tsuga said that crater is,> Pisca said. Her needles rippled as she mimed a terran gesture of thoughtfulness, tapping a few fingers against the wooden frame of her face. Even she was better at it than Tsuga was. <I wonder if–>

She was interrupted by a shrill noise from the doorway – the alpha, Cass, had raised thumb and forefinger to her lips and let out a loud whistling sound. Apparently the noise was some kind of terran signal, because all activity in the room ceased as the terrans collectively turned to look. "Strategic Caucus, five minutes!" she called, taking the fingers from her mouth. "Table, chairs, the works! Someone pipe the intercom upstairs so Walthers can listen in." She made her way past one of Tsuga's sprawling limbs and stopped in front of Polyphylla. "Is there anything the three of you need?"

"Oh, no, thank you," Polyphylla said. "It's still quite chilly in here, but the heater should make it nice and toasty in short order." She tapped the heating globe with a single vine. "Of course, there's quite a lot we intend to do for you. But, introductions first!" She smiled and lifted a hand. "Polyphylla Aptenia, Second Bloom, she/her."

"Cass Hope, Captain, Bulwark Collective Militia," the little terran said, taking Polyphylla's hand with only a little hesitation. Afterwards, she stripped off the cap and shook out her long mane of head-fur, long and wavy, deep brown-black with white stripes down the sides.

<Is that striping a sign that she's a the alpha?> Tsuga asked. They'd never seen a human with that kind of marking before – but then, they hadn't spent a great deal of time around humans in general.

<No, it's a sign of aging,> Polyphylla replied. <The hair follicles wilt over time. But terrans do tend to be fairly hierarchical, and age *is* one category they sort by.> "Forgive me, Tsuga just had a brief question about terrans. And this is Pisca Chlorsar, Third Bloom, she/her," Polyphylla continued. "She and her mentor, Tsuga, whom you've met, are planetary ecological engineers. They're here to assess the overall habitability of this planet, which, now that I've seen it up close, does not seem suited to either of our species' needs."

"I'll save you time: it's a frozen shithole," Cass said in the brief moment before Pisca's hands leapt forward and seized one of hers.

“Very nice to meet you! I said that right, didn’t I? Wow! I knew terrans pruned their hair, but didn’t know it would wilt if you didn’t. I didn’t know terrans nested communally in the wild, either!”

“I– what?” Cass jerked her hand away, working it into a fist and then releasing it a few times in succession. For a moment, Tsuga was sure the little sophont was about to engage in violence – she’d heard all manner of stories – but after a moment she let the hand drop. Her eyes remained locked on the floor. “We’ll start the Caucus in a moment. You can explain everything then, so everyone can hear it.”

“If that’s the way you’d prefer to do it,” Polyphylla said, “we’re more than happy to follow your lead.” Cass nodded and walked away, balling up her fist and flicking it out a few more times – curiously, *not* the hand that Pisca had seized. <Well, that’s unusual,> Polyphylla said. <Very unusual.>

<What do you mean?> Tsusa said, shifting their bulk slightly to lean closer to Polyphylla – their conversation was drawing stares from the terrans moving furniture around.

<Well, Terran hierarchs generally prefer to keep negotiations private so they can maintain a sense of control over others not party to them. I’d assumed this Caucus she referred to would be herself and a select few, but–> She gestured around the room, the beds stacked along the walls and a handful of terrans erecting a folding table in the center. <–no one’s leaving.>

<Maybe it’s a propaganda thing,> Pisca said. <Terrans love propaganda.>

<Showing off?> Polyphylla mused. <That might be the case, I suppose. Well, we’ll see soon enough, I think, look.> Cass was taking a seat at the head of the table, on a rickety-looking folding chair; a few of the other humans were doing likewise around the circumference of the table, leaving the end facing the three Affini empty. The rest of the terrans stood, squatted, or leaned against the wall at the fringes of the room, or piled into the hallways leading away from it.

Cass lifted a fist and knocked on the table three times, and the chatter among the terrans in the room slowly petered out. “This is a special meeting of the Bulwark Strategic Caucus,” she called out, “to discuss the arrival of our xeno visitors, their statement to the Caucus, and any relevant action the Caucus should then decide to take following that statement. At this time the Chair asks unanimous consent to hear the xeno statement.” After a brief pause, during which none of the terrans spoke, she continued. “Without objection, so ordered. Ms. Aptenia, you have the floor.”

<My, so uncharacteristically polite.> Polyphylla smiled and inclined her head to the alpha. “Thank you, Ms. Hope. Hello, everyone! My name is Polyphylla Aptenia, Second Bloom, my pronouns are she/her, and I represent the Affini Compact. First of all, I want to offer an apology for taking so long to find you out here, but we’ve been quite busy. Your government has not been particularly cooperative, and the pacification campaign took three years by your calendar. However, now that the Terran Accord has been dissolved–”

Tsuga gave a start as practically the entire room began cheering loudly, laughing, hugging one another, letting out loud whoops, and so on. A few began singing, and soon more and

more joined in until the entire room seemed to vibrate with the chorus. Only a rare few didn't join in.

<That…wasn't what I expected to happen,> Polyphylla said, after a moment.

<What's going on?> Pisca asked, looking around the room as she tried to decide between confusion and excitement. <How come they're singing?>

<I have absolutely no idea,> Polyphylla replied.

<Comforting,> Tsuga said, shifting in place and trying to listen to the words – it wasn't quite the same as the way the terrans talked normally, but it was close. <The international ideal… unites the human race? I don't like the sound of *that*.>

<It does sound a bit feralist, doesn't it?> Polyphylla said. <But if they're feralists, why would they celebrate? I think it's celebration, anyway. They certainly *look* happy.> Even the alpha, Cass, was on her feet, and though she was banging on the table trying to to restore some semblance of order, she had an enormous grin on her face, the same as so many of the others.

"Come to order, please!" she shouted, a laugh sneaking out as she did so. Absolutely no one listened, and the vast majority continued to sing as loudly as possible.

"I move the Caucus adopt the following resolution!" someone shouted from the crowd along the wall. "Resolved, that the Terran Accord can get fucked!" Cheers all around, as half a dozen voices shouted, "Second!"

"That motion is *not* in order at this time," Cass replied, still laughing.

"Motion to suspend the rules to allow debate on the motion for the Accord to get fucked!" There was more laughter, from all around the room, but the song soon reached its finale, and slowly the gathered terrans began to calm down a little. The room was still filled with a vibrant energy, though, and a dozen chattering conversations carried on around the room.

<If they do that for every little thing we tell them, we'll be here until tomorrow at least just explaining ourselves,> Tsuga said, shaking out their needles. All the laughter and celebration in the world, whatever the reason, would never make them feel comfortable in a squalid little hole in the ground like this.

<Aww, let 'em celebrate if they're happy,> Pisca said. <I bet they throw great parties!>

<They'll throw much better ones once we get them out of here,> Polyphylla said, before making a very terran-sounding throat-clearing noise. "Ahem! Might I continue?"

"Please do," Cass said, taking her seat again. Even Tsuga could tell she was fighting to force the smile off her face. "Apologies for the interruption."

"No, no, it's alright," Polyphylla said. "Though, I'm curious – most terrans, despite the Accord's myriad failings, don't have quite *that* reaction to being told their government no longer exists."

“The Accord is *not* our government,” Cass said, her voice firm.

“It wasn’t *anyone’s* government,” a wiry, dark-haired woman seated at the table added. Tsuga remembered her; one of the ‘logistics crew’ from up top. “It was the enforcer of capital’s whims, a machine of pure bourgeois oppression set against the people, and nothing but!”

“Thanks, Nell, but not really the point, and you don’t have the floor.”

“You mean to say,” Polyphylla asked, “that you consider yourself an independent polity? Well, that adds some complications, but nothing too serious. We’ll need a separate domestication treaty, of course, but that can come later. What you need to know is that the Affini Compact is here for you, and from now on, you don’t have to worry about anything. Your needs will be met, you will be safe, and you will be free to become the best version of yourself that you can possibly be, whatever form that takes.”

Something had gone wrong somewhere. The mood in the room shifted, and the quiet conversation around the fringes of the room died out. “What do you mean by *domestication?*” one woman at the table asked.

“Trish,” Cass said, “I’m trying to maintain something approaching order here.”

Trish rolled her eyes. “Will the speaker yield for a question?” she said, the acid tone in her voice obvious even to Tsuga.

“Thank you.” Cass looked to Polyphylla.

“…oh! Well, yes, of course!”

“Thank you. My question is: what hell do you mean by *domestication?*”

“… I’m sorry, have you not seen any of our broadcasts?” Polyphylla looked around the room, and was visibly fretting at a clear lack of recognition.

“O-M spiked our hypermetric relay when they left,” Cass explained. “Then the Cosmic Navy killed everything in orbit with an integrated circuit. We’ve been cut off for three years. All we know is that the Accord was at war.” She glanced to the side; Tsuga followed her line of sight to a burly terran with pronounced facial fur that made it difficult to read his expression, though his nod was clear enough. “A war they apparently lost, to you.”

“Well,” said Polyphylla, “that *does* explain rather a lot about your reactions. I apologize for the misunderstanding.” She bowed her head slightly. “To answer your question, domestication is, quite simply, our universal goal of ensuring that all sophonts are freed from privation and suffering, within a safe and secure environment that meets all needs – as I said above. We fix what’s broken, and we look after you to ensure it doesn’t break again.”

“That’s *not* what domestication is,” Trish said.

“It’s probably the best choice of words in your language, though of course it doesn’t correspond exactly with your conception of the practice. Actually, the word is pulling double-duty, since it refers not only to the species-level process of absorption into the Affini

Compact under a Protectorate and the guarantee of well-being, but also to individual domestication – that's when an Affini takes care of a cute little sophont personally in a legally binding and very loving relationship wherein political rights are surrendered and the sophont becomes the property of the Affini in question. We use xenodrugs to help control unwanted personality traits and correct anything holding them back from being their best selves, and we generally spoil them quite rotten, as the terran saying goes."

"So it's not some kind of weird translation issue," Nell said. "You're saying you basically keep humans as *pets*."

"Only those who volunteer," Polyphylla clarified, "or those who present a danger to themselves or others if left to their own devices. Don't worry, little one, I'm not going to domesticate *you*," she added with a quiet chuckle. "My vines are already quite full. No, for now, our priority is to gather whatever data is available about your population, the better to handle any emergency needs you might have while we evacuate you to our ship in orbit, where we can better provide for you while the local climate is ameliorated."

There was immediately an outburst of grumbling and a few shouts from the perimeter of the room. "Fuck that!" was one Tsuga heard clearly. Another, barely audible: "I'd off myself before I let anyone put me on a ship again."

<This is not going well,> Tsuga said, leaning forward once more – and, once again, inadvertently frightening a few of the terrans who hadn't realized how close they were.

<I don't understand it,> Polyphylla said. <If they haven't been subjected to propaganda, you'd think they'd be much more amenable to this.>

<Maybe terrans just don't like domestication,> Pisca said. <Feralists are always complaining about florets like there's something wrong with them for wanting to be happy.>

<They like domestication just fine once they've had a taste of it,> Polyphylla said. <*That*, at least, I can assure you.> The conversation among the terrans, meanwhile, was dying down – Cass was, once again, knocking at the table.

"Your proposal is to evacuate the entire population of Solstice to a ship," she said, her thick black eyebrows meeting above her nose. Tsuga was fairly certain that was a threat display, or a signal of distress perhaps. Either way, not a good sign. "*One* ship."

"The *Tillandsia* is quite capable of accommodating you all, though depending on how many terrans are on the planet, it may temporarily lead to somewhat cramped quarters that we would normally never allow while we arrange for your final disposition to other ships or stations," Polyphylla said. "We'd like to start with you here – our shuttle is large enough that I think we can take you all up today. How many are you, precisely?"

No one answered. Then, Nell stood, and Cass nodded to her.

"I move that the Strategic Caucus adopt the following: that the Affini Compact's request to evacuate the Bulwark is rejected," Nell said. A few, included the bearded terran, called out, "Second!"

<Dirt and roots,> Tsuga grumbled. <Never mind tomorrow, we're going to be here all week.>

Meanwhile, Cass was speaking again: "The question is, shall the Affini Compact's request to evacuate the Bulwalk be rejected? Do you have a statement?" When she nodded, Cass added, "Nell has the floor. Timekeeper, please start the clock."

"First of all," Nell said, "I'm against this for a lot of reasons, but the single most critical is that we can't leave the Bulwark unstaffed! You know it, I know it – the whole system relies on there *being* a Bulwark!" Nods and sounds of assent from all round. "I don't think I need to belabor this," she went on. "We can argue about this domestication nonsense all we want, or anything else, but whatever anyone brings up, remember this: Bulwark *cannot be abandoned*. I yield the remainder of my time," she said as she sat down again.

"Motion to amend," Trish said, standing.

"Trish has the floor," Cass said.

"I move that the resolution be amended, and that the words 'but that needed medical supplies, food, and water be accepted as offered' be inserted at the end of the sentence."

"The question is on the amendment to the main motion, that being…"

Pisca was leaning in, rapt. <…Polyphylla, are they–?>

<They *are*,> Polyphylla said, every vine in her body shivering with excitement. <They're *governing!* Oh, I feel so lucky to be here to see this!>

<Didn't humans used to govern themselves all the time?> Tsuga said. It *was,* they had to admit, very cute watching the terrans work through a formalized structure entirely orally – or nearly entirely, they realized, as they noticed a terran with red head-fur rapidly writing on a tablet.

<Not out in the open like this!> Polyphylla said, interlacing her fingers and very nearly vibrating clean off the floor. <Apparently, they traditionally govern in rooms filled with smoke. There's some debate as to whether this is some sort of guilt-assuaging practice, or whether it's to disguise who is speaking. Either way, of course, it's terribly unhealthy for the poor little terrans themselves. But look at *these* terrans! Right out in the open! And it's not limited to the ones at the table, either! Look!> Indeed, the terran with the dark face fur from the logistics crew was speaking on the amendment even now, and they'd never been at the table. <This might actually be the most adorable thing I've ever seen.>

The terrans continued to debate back and forth, offering motion after motion. Polyphylla was entirely absorbed in the proceedings, and Pisca was her usual excitable self, but even Tsuga found themself being drawn in. It was clear that there were at least two camps, possibly more, fighting over the wording of the motion as it grew and grew, all the while taking potshots at one another about some kind of internal terran politics or perhaps religion – either way, Tsuga didn't understand it. The word *bourgeois* came up frequently, especially from the terran called Nell, and all Tsuga could glean from context was that it was *not* a good thing to be considered bourgeois.

Finally, Cass spoke: “The question is on the following motion: that the Affini Compact’s request to evacuate the Bulwark is rejected pending investigation of the Affini ship and its amenities; that said investigation shall be carried out by a committee of three; that said committee shall consist of Captain Cassanda Hope and two volunteers; that during the course of the investigation, any aid offered by the Affini shall be delivered to Bulwalk for distribution to outlying communities and collectives; and that after the investigation, the Bulwark Strategic Caucus shall transmit the committee’s findings to other outlying communities and collectives with all haste. Is there any further debate?” When no one spoke, she added, “Those in favor of the motion, raise your hand.” A flurry of hands rose across the room. “Thank you. Those against, raise your hand.” Another flurry of hands, but notably smaller than the first. “Thank you. In the opinion of the chair, the ayes have it and the motion is carried. Do we have further business? There being no further business before the Strategic Caucus, the Chair asks unanimous consent for officers to move to closed session for discussion of sensitive information regarding the matter at hand.” The room was silent. “Without objection, so ordered. The Strategic Caucus stands recessed until called to order.”

<Ooooh, that was so *exciting!*> Polyphylla said as Cass and the others at the table stood and made their way to another room. <And it could have gone much worse, really.>

<I don’t see why we’re letting them just… *stay* here,> Tsuga said, coiling themself in just a little tighter as the humans started to get up and move around once again – they’d already had a vine or two trod upon. <These conditions are completely intolerable!>

<They absolutely are,> Polyphylla said, <but I’d like to see them come willingly – it helps so much with integration if we don’t have to give them all a dose of Class-Zs and have them wake up in a strange place.>

<It’s not a reasonable decision on their part,> Tsuga insisted. <They’re actively risking their well-being for no reason whatsoever, and we shouldn’t be enabling that.>

<They’re going to let us help them,> Polyphylla said, stroking Tsuga with a tangle of vines, <so a few days won’t make any difference. We’ll have Affini here to look after them, to get to know them, and to get them accustomed to us being around, helping them, and eventually to making the important decisions. Trust me, Tsuga. I know you’re new to terrans, but this is going *so much better* than it does with most of their governments – and the terrans there aren’t usually much better off than this, either.>

<I don’t like it,> Tsuga said. <This planet is going to need years of ecological engineering to get it anywhere close to acceptable climatic conditions, and this “bunker” of theirs…> A shudder ran through them, floor to ceiling. <I don’t like it.>

<I don’t think any of us do,> Pisca said, <but–> She paused as the little terran with the red head-fur walked hesitantly up to the three Affini, nervously worrying one hand with the other. “Oh, hello, cutie! Is there something we can do for you?”

The red-head took a moment to respond. “Uhm, n-no, I just– sorry, I’ll just go.”

“No, no, stay,” Polyphylla said. “If there’s anything we can help you with, we’d be more than happy to.”

“Yeah,” Pisca said enthusiastically, “spill the peanuts!”

The terran simply stared up at Pisca for a moment, an expression of confusion on their face – but it soon faded. “W-well, uhm, it’s just that, I know Trish will probably tell you when she gets out of the Officers’ meeting, but I just wanted to make sure it didn’t get lost in the shuffle, I mean, Captain Hope has so many things on her plate right now–” They took a deep breath and kept on worrying at their hand. “I just want to make sure she doesn’t get too focused on everyone else and forget to ask for the medication she needs, that’s all.”

“Awww, that’s so thoughtful of you!” Pisca said, smiling and cracking her chest cavity open to retrieve her tablet – which gave the little terran a start. “What’s the medication, sweetie? I’ll write it down so we don’t forget it.”

“Estradiol. Or the standard precursors, but, uhm, if you have it, just the estradiol is fine.”

“Es-tra-di-ol,” Pisca said, marking it down. “Hmm. What’s that for?”

“It’s a primitive terran Class-G,” Polyphylla said. She ruffled the terran’s hair with one hand, smiling warmly. “I assure you, dear, we can do much better than *that*. According to that incredibly adorable vote you all just took, she’ll be coming to visit us anyway, so we’ll take care of it up there, but I’ll make sure the other teams bring some Class-Gs down just in case. Thank you so much for coming to us with this – we know your culture often trains you to not want to ask for help, even for others. That’s a habit we’ll help you unlearn.”

“Uhm. Thank you?” they said, looking awkwardly at the ground. “I-I mean, yes, thank you, obviously…”

“Hey,” Pisca said, crouching down to put herself on the terran’s level and leaning in close. “What’s your name, sweetie?”

“Uhm, Blaine,” they said, glancing up – and almost immediately becoming entranced, Pisca’s eyes drawing them in effortlessly.

Everbloom, Tsuga thought, *what a seed this one is*.

“Well, Blaine, I hope we get to see you up on the *Tillandsia* soon!” Pisca said, absolutely heedless of how deep she’d already pushed the terran. “I’d love to show you around. Just ask for Pisca Chlorosar, Third Bloom! Once all this investigation silliness is over, you’ll all be joining us anyway. I mean, do you really want to keep living in an awful little hole in the ground like this?” The terran slowly shook their head, and only came back to themself after Pisca reached up, stroked their cheek, and straightened up, breaking eye contact.

“…sorry, what?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it, little one,” Polyphylla said, patting Blaine on the shoulder. “We’ll take care of it. Why don’t you go have some tea and take a break? You’ve been working so hard taking notes after all!”

"…yeah, tea sounds good," they said, nodding and blinking slowly as if they'd just woken up before turning and walking away in a daze.

<Seed,> Polyphylla said, her vines slithering over one another in amusement.

<*Such* a seed,> Tsuga agreed. She didn't need to know terrans to know obvious seed behavior when she saw it.

<Huh? What do you mean?> Pisca said, her confusion evident.

The wardroom was just a storeroom, really, and with all the officers of the Bulwark it was standing room only, cramped and not entirely pleasant – but the door was heavy and deterred eavesdropping, so it made a good meeting place for discussing operations.

"Standard plan for recontact," Cass said. "Let's move through it, step by step."

"We have enough supplies in the Bulwark to operate for up to three months if cut off from other settlements," Nell said. "Not in a pleasant capacity, but we can manage it. If whatever aid the xenos drop turns out to be safe, that extends the timeline."

"Which is a big if, considering they're throwing around words like *domestication*," Trish said. Her arms were crossed and her sour mood was palpable. It reflected a common feeling that Cass had noticed spreading around the periphery of the bunker's main hall during the meeting. "But if it is, we absolutely need it. We're down to acetaminophen and wishes as far as medical is concerned."

"If it is safe, we need to think about moving critical supplies outward as we can," Cass said. "Quietly. We use the escape tunnels under cover of darkness, and only when their ship isn't overhead. They'll probably set up a satellite net soon, so first order of business is to get messages out through the contact chain. Pass on orders for radio silence and let the settlements know to hunker down. The less activity above ground, the better."

"That's is going to put a dent in the growing season," Hutchins muttered, polishing his steamed-up glasses on his shirttail. "This year was looking like it might have a decent summer."

"But it'll make it easier to survive if we have to go to Case Dandelion," Cass countered. "Benefits and drawbacks. Ultimately, what matters is keeping our people out of enemy hands long enough to shift their cost-benefit equation in favor of leaving us alone. Make it too expensive to waste time, effort, and money chasing us down. Just because the enemy is xenos instead of fascists doesn't change that."

"And here you were hoping they'd be friendly," Nell said ruefully.

"I'm hoping they still can be," Cass admitted. "I'm hoping that this is all just bad translation and cultural misunderstandings in action. I don't like the idea of fighting them, not even asymmetrically. They beat the Accord in three years – we *barely* kicked a bunch of screws and suits off the planet."

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I don’t plan to just roll over and accept a different set of bourgeois masters,” Nell replied. “We’ll see what’s what when we get up there.”

“We?” Cass said. “You plan on volunteering?”

“They’re all smiles and good cheer. Stinks of habitual propaganda. I wouldn’t be surprised to find some kind of a Potemkin village setup on their ship, the same way O-M did for investors and potential colony groups – ‘see, look how nice it is here,’ that sort of thing – and if they do, I’m the one best equipped to see through it. Logistics doesn’t lie.”

Cass thought for a moment, then nodded. “Fair enough. Good argument.”

“That, and we need someone up there with a real understanding of dialectics,” she added, smiling with as much patronizing smugness as she could without starting a fistfight. “Otherwise, who knows what you’ll miss.”

“I’m not ignorant of dialectics,” Cass said, taking the time to add a note of exasperation to her voice, “I just don’t think it’s a philosophical magic bullet. We don’t have time to debate theory, in any case. No other volunteers from among officers. We need the rest of you here.” There were no objections. Cass wasn’t surprised – why should her people be champing at the bit to throw themselves into the unknowable maw of the xenos? But then, that was why she’d put herself at the head of the committee.

She’d take the risk on their behalf.

Chapter End Notes

I read Robert's Rules of Order for this. Like, the entire thing.

Tune in next time for (I hope) a chapter that isn't purely setup.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

> "Say the Line, Cass!"
> Content warnings for: vomiting, medical stuff, and space porn (not *that* kind of space porn!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had been decades since Cass had last been in space, and then she hadn't had the benefit of riding in the control cabin with a panoramic viewscreen. She watched as the shuttle lifted noiselessly away from the surface, as the horizon began to curve, and as the grey-blue sky gave way to the inky, star-flecked void. Gravity gave up its hold, and for a brief moment she felt her gorge rise, the way it had so many years ago when the Accord had unceremoniously shipped her hundreds of light years from home. This time, she mastered the reflex. So, thankfully, did Nell and Blaine. Whether the Affini could vomit, she didn't want to think about, but they seemed unaffected as well. Then, a gentle gravity returned, pushing her back into her seat and calming her stomach for a bare moment.

"Oooh! There she is!" Pisca had a hand around Blaine's shoulders, and was pointing with the other. "See that? That's the *Tillandsia!*" In the distance, a point of light was sweeping in a slow arc across the stars. Cass felt a surge of vertigo as her brain once again started trying to figure out which way was down.

The vertigo only grew worse the closer they fell toward the point of light. First, it resolved into an oblong shape – then, a tapered cylinder with strange projections from one end. As it grew larger, details emerged one by one, until she felt she could no longer keep track of it all – the gently spinning, leaflike projections, the coiled and tentacle-like vines, the series of tapered bells eloquent of rocketry. There was so much of it that she could stare at it for hours and still not see the whole of it.

And then it got bigger.

And bigger.

And *bigger*. Soon it filled the panoramic window entirely, the gaping maw at the front of the ship looming like some kind of benthic apex predator whose distended jaws would swallow the shuttle like a minnow – which, in short order, it did. The darkness completely encompassed the shuttle – as big as it was, it was nothing compared to the ship it had just entered, a mote of dust trapped in a sunbeam.

As Cass's eyes adjusted, the shuttle passed by larger ships carefully moored in the incomprehensibly huge docking bay, some the equal of many a terran warship, but still infinitesimal by comparison to the ship they hid within. Poetry was her escape, her mind desperate to ground itself against the onslaught of wonder and apprehension with the cool and comfortable strokes of rote memorization.

(–where Alph the sacred river ran / through caverns measureless to man / down to a sunless sea.)

By the time Cass pulled herself out of her reverie, the shuttle was already touching down in a brightly-lit alcove, which easily encompassed it – then, it and the entire shuttle began to slide down yet further, winking safety lights the only illumination in the gargantuan shaft. Arriving below did did her no favors, though, for as she stumbled down the shuttle's stairway she lifted her head to the sky and saw the ground instead. The gently curving flight deck – if you could call something so enormous a *deck* – wrapped all the way around, and Cass could see shuttles just like the one she'd come from sticking to the distant ceiling like flies. She could see shapes, *people*, moving between them, almost impossible to make out. Her head swam, the gentle tug of gravity somehow worse than the forever-falling terror of zero-gee.

She fell to hands and knees, emptying her stomach onto the glistening, chitin-like decking. The left knee screamed out a protest, and the sour taste of vomit only made her body want to bring up more. She felt someone pull her hair away from her face, felt a cool breeze across her cheeks – it helped, a little.

"Are you alright?" Tsuga asked. Cass glanced up and saw the enormous tree-like xeno kneeling beside her, a cluster of vines wrapping around her hair and holding it back. She just as quickly looked back to the floor, having caught another glimpse of the impossible ceiling. Her mind knew what was going on: just like human vessels, the Affini clearly created artificial gravity with centrifuges. Her stomach, however, was not interested in the science, and her inner ear was siding with her gut. This centrifuge, they insisted, was too damned big to be real. Obviously, the central nervous system, jackass tyrant that it was, had decided to eat something it shouldn't have, and it was up to the stomach, once again, to make sure that fateful snack didn't kill them all by hurling up the offending poison.

"Oh, I was worried this might happen," Polyphylla said. "Ms. Hope, if you need to close your eyes, that's perfectly alright. It takes some terrans a little while to acclimate to the scale of our shipboard habitation rings. Not that this *is* a habitation ring, of course," she added. "Those are below, past that bulkhead. We'll take an elevator down, and maybe the larger rings won't bother you quite so much."

Horror rose in the back of Cass's mind. *They get bigger?!*

“Close your eyes,” Tsuga insisted. “I’ll carry you.” She felt more vines wrap around her body, felt herself lifted into the air before she could protest., and squeezed her eyes shut. Tsuga cradled her in her arms, and once the movement stopped, it was tolerable – her bark was roughly textured, but not so much that it hurt, and her gentle swaying paradoxically soothed her reeling sense of balance. She risked opening an eye for a moment, saw Blaine and Nell little better off, but at least they’d kept their feet and their lunch. She let her eyes slip shut again as Tsuga began to take her long steps, each pace followed by seeming eternity, the lull strangely hypnotic before footfall jarred her back to wakefulness.

It was only when she came to a stop that Cass opened her eyes again, blinking as she took in the “elevator” that Tsuga and the others were standing in. It was utterly enormous, the size of a small theater, with glassy sides that showed the shaft outside it. The motion shifted suddenly, sliding laterally, and without conscious thought Cass gripped Tsuga’s arm, her eyes slamming shut again. “It’s just matching speed with the habitation ring,” Tsuga said. Gravity slowly pressed down on Cass, pushing her deeper into Tsuga’s arms, and through her eyelids she could perceive a sudden brightness.

“Oh *shit*,” she heard Nell say. With some trepidation Cass opened her own eyes. Beyond the window was a world in miniature, three rings curving around the inside of a cylinder that stretched into impossible distance, all filled with greenery and even forests – more, perhaps, than the urban areas. *Urban areas*, in a *starship*. A long, softly-glowing pillar stretched down the central axis, like a silvery line scratched in the universe, lighting the whole expanse as if by moonlight.

(*And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills / where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree; and here were forests ancient as the hills / surrounding sunny spots of greenery.)*

“What was that?” Tsuga stroked Cass’s head with a vine, and she couldn’t stop herself from flinching. Had she recited that out loud instead of just thinking it?

“Probably quoting Shakespeare again,” Nell said. It was odd to hear her voice coming up from below.

“Coleridge,” Cass grunted.

“What?”

“*Kubla Khan.* Coleridge.”

There was a moment of silence. Then, Nell said, “What does *coal* have to do with any of this?”

Cass didn’t answer, too lost in thought. Not of the stately pleasure dome, nor even the unfortunate albatross, but of the hard and fast numbers and equations of physics. She was no professional, but she’d had plenty of time to read and digest all manner of books in her twenty years on Solstice. She had a lay understanding of the kind of energies necessary to travel faster-than-light, and of the engineering challenges of doing so with successively larger and larger starships. The requirements, both in terms of energetic input and degenerate matter

necessary to punch a hole in space-time large enough for this leviathan were astronomical – on the order of capturing the total energy output of a main-sequence star for a few brief seconds. And that was without considering the complexity of the calculations for a ship this large to go anywhere near where one wanted, and the metallurgical advances needed to keep a ship this size from tearing itself apart not just during a jump, but even just drifting in orbit like it was doing now.

As the elevator slowed, mere moments from touching down on the edge of the nearest ring, Cass came to three realizations. The first was that the Affini were terrifyingly advanced, far more than a simple electrodynamic flight system like the shuttle's had implied. They clearly had an understanding of physics that let them play with energies on a scale terrans could scarcely comprehend, let alone equal. In every physical science, they were leaps and bounds beyond humanity – it was obvious just from the view out the window.

That led to the second realization. *We never stood a chance*, Cass thought. The Cosmic Navy, the force that had wiped out Landfall and killed so many of her friends and comrades with a single shot, mighty and implacable in any direct contest of arms, was so obviously and utterly outclassed by the Affini. Any stand-up fight against them was doomed to fail. She was shocked it had taken the Affini three years to beat the Accord.

(*Weave a circle round him thrice / and close your eyes with holy dread, for he on honeydew hath fed / and drunk the milk of Paradise.*)

The third realization fell into place shortly thereafter. *It's a good thing we never planned on making it a stand-up fight.*

There was a train – that much Cass remembered – but the odd, echoing rumbles from inside Tsuga kept lulling her half to sleep, half consumed with thoughts as she picked apart the implications of the Affini's technological advantage. She jerked back to awareness of her surroundings, and there were trees outside rushing past the window. Again she drifted off, and this time when she came back there were buildings. Asleep again, and again aware, jarred by footfall as Tsuga carried her. Though the ground vaulted up to become the ceiling (or the sky – Cass still wasn't sure how to think of it), her inner ear had finally broken with her stomach and defected to her brain's side, and she no longer felt as if she was about to return to dry heaves. She started following the other rings, their rate of spin subtly different, and drifted off a final time, only to come back to herself when Tsuga carried her into a brightly-lit building.

"Huh?" She tried to sit up, and remembered that she was in Tsuga's arms, lashed down by vines. Only now did she realize that some time must have passed, and she felt her face grow warm with embarrassment that she'd drifted off. She hadn't descended that deep into hyperfocus for a long time. "Put me down, please. Where are we?"

"The veterinarian," Tsuga said. "You were due to come here anyway, to ensure you aren't carrying any pathogens that might spread among the terran population aboard. Are you feeling more acclimated? Do you think you can stand?" Cass nodded; Tsuga gently unwound her vines and set her down on the ground. Her knee immediately began to complain, shoots of pain rocketing up her leg, forcing her to lean against what looked like a perfectly ordinary

reception desk to take the weight off of it. It was one of the few normally-scaled pieces of furniture in the place, she couldn't help but notice as she grimaced and let out a hiss. It was warm here, much warmer than on Solstice. The temperature change must have aggravated the joint.

Nell paid Cass' pain no mind. "The *vet*?!" she spat angrily. "You told us we were going for a medical checkup, and you take us to a *vet?*"

"Where else would we take you?" Tsusa said. "Xenosophonts go to the vet for this sort of thing."

"Indeed they do," came a deep, croaky voice from behind the desk. Cass looked up and saw another Affini, this one broad and hulking, a damp hill of moss and vines that was only vaguely terran-shaped; his "head," such as it was, was little more than a hillock atop his wide shoulders, from which hung two thick agglomerations of vines that looked almost nothing like arms. "I'll assume these are our three visitors, but it looks as though this one's volunteered to go first if she's having acute pain." Before she knew what was happening, Cass found herself being hoisted into the air once again, enfolded in the, yes, definitely damp arms of the newcomer.

"I'm fine," she protested, still clenching her teeth as the sudden, jarring motion of being lifted set off her knee again. "It's nothing! Put me down."

"Hi, fine," the Affini rumbled as he carried her behind the desk and down a long corridor, "I'm Arvense Telmatei, Fifth Bloom, he/they."

Even though her pain, Cass felt her thoughts jar to a halt. *Does he seriously think my name is 'fine?' He is an alien, after all*. "N-no, my name is Cass. Cassandra Hope."

"Mmmm. Well, that does spare me the trouble of asking," Arvense said, turning the corner into an honestly-almost-stereotypical exam room, but built to the same massive scale as everything else. Instruments and drawers lined the walls, and an elevated platform occupied the center of the room. Arvense set her down upon it, then turned and began tapping away at a tablet. "Hmmm," he said a moment later. "No, that doesn't make sense. There are seventeen Cassandra Hopes listed, but all of them are accounted for and none have ever been to Solstice."

"Oh," Cass said, laughing a little at herself. "Sorry. That's a revolutionary pseuedonym. It's just been so long that I– okay, try looking under Layla Al-Tabari. You seriously have the entire Acccord's population database?"

"Lifted it right from your central servers," Arvense said cheerfully. "Paperwork is our speciality, you know, and the Office of Transitional Neoxenoveterinary Archeoburaucracy is very good at their job. Hmmm. Well, plenty of Leyla Al-Tabaris, but again, I don't see how any of them could be you. Is there any other name they might have you down as?"

Cass sighed. Of course the central bureaucracy had refused to honor the name change. Even if she hadn't been a convict, they probably wouldn't have – it was the kind of bureaucratic

hatefulness the Accord seemed to thrive on. Still, it had been years since she'd heard the name, much less spoken it herself. She'd honestly almost forgotten it.

"Mmm, I see. Let me try coming at it from another angle. Ah-*ha*. Well, that was much easier. I have here an Al-Tabari who arrived on Solstice some twenty-three years ago. May I assume that's you?"

"Yes, that's me," she said, feeling as though a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. How was it that an alien intuitively understood dysphoria when half the terrans she'd met looked at her as if she'd grown a second head when she tried to explain it?

"I'll go ahead and add a note that the name of record is incorrect," he said. "And alas, not much in the way of medical information attached to this file."

"I'd have had to see a doctor regularly for that," Cass replied, massaging her knee. The pain was receding, but still very insistent on making itself felt.

"Well, *that's* not acceptable," Arvense said, tucking his tablet halfway into his chest and letting the moss and vines slowly absorb it with a series of squelching noises. "Rather than a single pathogen check, I think I ought to do a full workup. You're clearly not in good health, Cass, and that's leaving aside the acute pain in your knee. How long have you been having that?"

"A couple years," Cass said, shrugging. "It's just getting old. We do that. I assume you do too."

"Oh, we do, in a manner of speaking," he said. "Still, if you have a chronic complaint, I really should take care of it."

"Look, it's fine, honestly. It just does this sometimes. It's not a problem."

"Mmm, well, in my experience, the terran knee is a *very* problematic little joint," he said, wiggling his head-blob up and down in what must have been intended to be a nod. "But if nothing else, I admire your good cheer. If I had an osseous endoskeleton with a primary load-bearing joint whose associated tendon system was horrifically prone to lasting injury, I'd be hopping mad about it." He paused a moment. "Nothing? No? Hmm." He rubbed his practically non-existent chun.

Cass stared up at him. The way he was talking, it was almost as if– "…you're telling jokes?"

His silvery eyes lit up with shades of brilliant gold. "Yes! I find that terrans respond *extremely* well to humor, florets particularly. It's fantastic for stress relief. I believe the terran term for it is 'bedside mansion.' Something to do with dollhouses, I suppose. Idioms so rarely translate well. In any case, I've had great success with humor. You, on the other hand, you're a very tough egg to crack! I might have to break out the *really* funny jokes. I know a good one about three feralists who walk into a bar together – but, no, I should save that for when you're really blue, so don't hold your breath."

Now that she knew to be listening for jokes, Cass got it straight away, and let out a little snort.

"*There* we go!" Arvense said, clapping his hands(?) together with a wet thump. "Feeling a little more at ease?"

"Strangely enough, yes, a little," Cass admitted. "I didn't expect to have a comedian for a doctor."

"Veterinarian, my dear, *veterinarian*. A doctor knows one species– that is to say, Affini– and a host of various compatibility issues grafts might have. A veterinarian, on the other hand, has to know the intimate details of biology, biochemistry, kinesics, and everything else having to do with health care for not just one but every possible species of sophont they're likely to encounter. I've treated terrans, rinans, beeple, spectrum jellies – once, I even got to work on a regtath whose owner was passing through. It turns out it had an allergy to turmeric! It was quite a challenge getting to the root of *that* problem."

"Ha ha," Cass said, rolling her eyes but giving Arvense a smile. She didn't want him to think she hadn't got the joke again. "Fine. Veterinarian. I suppose you want me to strip off?"

"If you're comfortable with it," Arvense said as his vines rummaged through the drawers. One withdrew what looked something like an IV kit, but grown instead of plastic. "I'll also need to borrow a little bit of your blood. Don't worry, I'll put it right back where I found it."

The examination was, for as methodical as Arvense made it, surprisingly brief. He examined every square inch of her, working her knee gently to test range of motion and making a note of every scar, from the bullet wounds to the surgical – the unlicensed physician she'd had snip her had done the best with what Cass could source, but he'd left his mark nonetheless, and Arvense was duly horrified. "Going to have to fix *that.* And *this* is coming out," he'd added, tapping the catheter port for her PVC birth control implant. "You've actually had this for twenty-two *years*? Unbelievable."

All in all, not too different from the few doctor's visits she'd had growing up, if one discounted the fact that said doctor was a shaggy mass of plant material. The IV line, despite its odd appearance, worked much the same way – out, into some inscrutable machine, and back in, while Arvense hmmed and nodded over his tablet. "Well, no wonder you're having joint problems," he said as Cass pulled her clothes back on. "Your hormones are a mess."

Cass shrugged as she started to pull up her trousers. "Menopause happens. I just jumped the gun a little."

"Well, we'll fix that. Don't pull those up just yet, though," he added, pulling open another drawer and removing a sealed canister. "We're going to do something about that knee."

"I figured it was a 'take two and call me in the morning' situation," Cass said, eyeing the canister warily. "What's in there?"

“This, my dear, is a symbiotic support organism.” He opened the canister and pulled out a mass of greenish fuzz, which he unrolled into a broad, thin mat of what looked like moss. Without hesitating, he began to wrap it around her left knee. Almost immediately, it went cold, and Cass couldn’t help but jumping. “Don’t worry, it’s just an anesthetic,” Arvense said soothingly, giving the moss another wrap and tapping it gently. “Otherwise, it’d sting quite a bit as it works its way in there to start repairing the joint.”

Cass flexed her knee experimentally, learning the feel of the strangely stiff moss. She winced a little – the joint still hurt. “I just wear this, and my knee gets better? You’ll forgive me if I don’t believe that.”

“There’s nothing quite like treating newcomers,” Arvense said, producing what was clearly supposed to be a smile. “So full of doubts, and so astonished when it all works as advertised. But given the abuse you’ve all suffered – and you in particular – I suppose I can’t be *too* surprised. Anyway: this will help support your knee and prevent further injury, as well as repairing damaged tissue. I want you to stay off it as much as possible for a few days to let it do its work. Moving around a little is fine, but no long walks! Understood?”

“I *am* here to investigate your ship, you know,” she said, pulling her trousers up over the weird mossy bandage. “Though, it’s a lot bigger than I was expecting. We all thought it’d be some cramped cattle-car.” The trip out to Solstice, wedged into a so-called sleeper pod in a low-gravity cargo bay for three weeks, was engraved in the special part of Cass’ brain reserved for nightmares. It was the same for many of her comrades.

“Oh, no, never,” Arvanse said sternly. “We believe in having lots of room to moo-ve around. In all seriousness, I do admire your pluck, but your health *must* come first.”

“I was chosen for this job, I can’t just *not do it*,” Cass protested.

“I’m sure a clever little sophont like you can figure out a way to do your work while also not aggravating a chronic injury,” he replied. “And I’m also sure whoever’s looking after you will be happy to help.”

“I’m a grown woman,” Cass said, gauging the distance from the top of the exam table to the floor. “I don’t need looking after.” Before she could push herself off, a few of Arvense’s vines wrapped around her and deftly set her on the floor. “Thanks,” she mumbled, trying very hard not to get worked up over the unexpected touch. The exam hadn’t been fun, but she’d known what was coming. It was always like that with doctors – you just had to grit your teeth and endure it.

“I’d be happy to do it myself, of course,” Arvense said, “but alas, I don’t think you’d find me a very good assistant. I’m kept very busy by your adorable peers.”

“Mmm. You mentioned there were Terrans aboard,” Cass said as she took a few cautious steps. The mossy knee brace *did* help. “All pets of yours, I assume.”

“Oh, not all of them,” Arvense said as he peered into another drawer. “But most, yes. This *is* a front-line ship, after all. We spent much of the pacification campaign directly involved in domesticating your Cosmic Navy, and then quite a bit of time around Terra as well. You

would not *believe* the things I've heard come out of such sweet little mouths. Now then," he went on after extracting a vial and pressing the tip of one of his vines against the top, "this is a Class-G xenodrug. It'll help get your hormone constitution back where it belongs. If you still had your original gonads, it would even begin the process of reconfiguring them into proto-ovaries, and they could take over secreting an appropriate hormone load. We can culture replacement tissue, but that'll just take a little while, since we're having to start from generalized tissue. In the meantime, weekly injections. Your arm?" As the vine swung towards Cass, she caught a glint of light along an almost hair-thin needle at the tip.

Cass stared up at the veterinarian, her jaw slipping just a little. "You're saying that, if I hadn't had an orchi, you could just *give me a shot* to turn them into ovaries?"

"It would begin the process," Arvense replied matter-of-factly. "Relocating them, some final structural modifications, ductwork, and so on would require very minor surgical intervention. I understand your Class-G analogues are very primitive, and I'm sorry you had to suffer with them for so long, but please understand that you now have free access to *far* superior medical options and healthcare than you did before. In my experience, this is often the most difficult part for terrans to grasp: you *will* be taken care of. We don't tolerate needs going unfulfilled. Now then: your arm?"

Almost mechanically, Cass raised her arm and rolled up her sleeve, blinking and staring into the corner of the room as she considered what Arvense had said. *You will be taken care of*. Well, that was a significant step up from the Accord, to be sure. As she felt a slight pinch in her arm, and a cool feeling diffusing throughout it, she began to lay out a list of questions she needed answered, based on what she'd just learned, everything from the structure of the Affini government to what exactly *domestication* entailed, and–

"There we are," Arvense said, ruffling Cass's hair with one hand(?). "Good girl, not a single complaint." Immediately, Cass tensed up, her shoulders jerking painfully and her eyes squinching shut as the burning, tingling sensation of her scalp being massaged rolled down her neck and into her body like a waterfall of pure revulsion. She recoiled, tripping over her own feet and backing up against the exam table, flinching as she flicked her hands and rolled her tongue along the roof of her mouth, trying to feel *anything* else.

When she finally managed to force the feeling down, reaching up to run her fingers through her hair just to make sure the unwanted sensation was gone for good, she cautiously opened her eyes. Instead of the confused or irate walking mass of plant and damp she expected, she saw Arvense calmly tapping away at his tablet. "You might have told me you experience tactile hypersensitivity," he said, glancing down at her. "That examination must have been absolute misery."

It took her a moment to find her voice. Arvense waited. "Doctors… doctors are like that," she managed to stammer out. "I expect it. It's fine. I'm a grown woman. I can handle discomfort if I know it's coming." She swallowed heavily, the sour taste of anxiety flooding her mouth. "The… head… *thing*. It just surprised me, that's all." She sucked in a halting breath, and let it out in a slow hiss. Her pounding heart slowed down, beat by beat.

"And I've treated many terrans with similar traits," Arvense said gently. "If I'd known, I could have performed the examination in such a way as to *not* cause you distress. Are there

any other details I, as your physician, should be aware of?" Cass shook her head – though, she wasn't certain what this weirdly affable xeno would consider to be important details. "Well, I think we're done then. Let's try walking as far as the waiting room. If you're still experiencing pain, tell me."

The walk back to the waiting room, short though it was, confirmed everything Arvense had told her about Affini medicine being leaps and bounds ahead of terran medicine. Her knee felt *better*, better than it even felt during the short months of summer back on Solstice. The brace was stiff, and tickled a little, but it worked, and worked well enough that Cass felt she probably *could* walk long-distance, even if she wasn't supposed to.

She heard the argument coming down the hall, long before she could pick out individual words. "–the same thing as capitalist production, the necessity to expand to acquire new markets, new resources, only *you're* after other species to make *pets* out of them–"

Oh, lovely, Cass thought. *They let Nell get started.* She didn't disagree with that particular point – it was a pretty accurate description of the Affini in terms of Marxist theory from what she'd heard of them – but Cass had argued with Nell enough times that she knew Nell had probably been to worse places and was intent on returning there over and over again before she let anyone get a word in edgewise. "Nell!" she shouted.

"–ultimately perpetuating the bourgeois– huh?" Nell blinked as Cass interrupted her, and glanced away from Polyphylla, who seemed to have an amused expression on her face for all that Nell was haranguing her about the plight of the proletariat. "Oh, good, you're here, you can back me up! This demsoc has been useless!"

"Hey," Blaine protested, without much enthusiasm.

"Explain to this wolf in sheep's clothing that providing for basic needs is meaningless if doing so replicates class structures of capital!"

"Wait, I thought you made clothes *out of* sheep," Polyphylla said, looking confused for just a moment. "And why is the wolf wearing clothes?"

"Nell, go with the nice comedian so he can make sure you don't have typhoid or something," Cass said, clapping a hand on Nell's shoulder and steering her towards Arvense.

"Wait, *comedian?*"

"Well, I'd love to start with the joke about construction," Arvense said, twisting the shape that passed for a mouth into a smile as he reached down to take Nell's hand, "but I'm still working on it. So, how about this one?" He began to lead her away, and as he did so, he went on: "An Affini and her floret walk into a cafe together…"

Cass sat down next to Blaine and let out a sigh. "How long was she going?"

"About as long as you were gone," Blaine said, scratching his head. "Sorry, I just– every time I tried to get her to calm down, she just got even more into it."

“That’s Nell. She may not be wrong, but she’ll be not wrong in the most abrasive way possible.”

“That was meant to be abrasive?” Polyphylla said. “I thought it was quite cute, if a bit confusing.”

“*Extremely* cute,” Pisca agreed. Even Tsuga grunted her assent.

“You’re far more patient than I am, then,” Cass said. “What brought it on, anyway?”

“Polyphylla was explaining about how they’re going to set aside a place for us to stay, and then Nell started asking about their economy and rent and a whole bunch of other things, and honestly I’m not sure *when* it went from asking questions to Chapter 2 of *Capital*. It probably wasn’t actually Chapter 2,” he added, “but that’s as far in as I’ve ever been able to get.”

“That’s farther than most do,” Cass said. “Including many Marxists.” She had briefly tried to memorize the weighty tome, but it had defeated her, and there were more interesting works to commit to memory anyway.

“I’m clearly going to have to do some reading of my own,” Polyphylla said. “None of the contact briefing materials had *anything* about use-values or trade-values or any of what she was talking about in it, I’m somewhat embarrassed to say.”

“Considering the Accord does its level best to kill us whenever it can, it’s not exactly a popular ideology,” Cass said. “But I’d be happy to walk you through the basics with a dash less dogma. Maybe when I’m not so tired, though.” She’d leaned back against the plush backing of the bench, and the damned thing was so comfortable she felt herself starting to drift off again. She pushed herself back upright, willed herself to keep going.

“If you’re that tired, perhaps we ought to get you to bed,” Polyphylla said, her voice full of concern. “Would you like something to help you sleep?”

Begging off the Class-Z (whatever that was) had taken most of what willpower Cass had left after such a long day – which was how she ended up being carried again, drifting off again. Arvense had insisted, first of all, that she not walk all the way to wherever she was going, and second, that an Affini keep an eye on her to ensure there were no unfortunate reactions to the medications she’d been given. Pisca had immediately volunteered, and just as immediately been disqualified by the other two. Polyphylla had demurred, citing her own obligations and a nebulous statement regarding her physical condition (which Cass still couldn’t determine, having known about Affini for all of twelve hours).

And so, once again, she fell asleep in Tsuga’s arms, lulled off by fatigue and by the gentle echoing inside that massive chest, the bark rough but not uncomfortable. Her last thought before sleep claimed her was a grumpy reminder to herself: *Don’t let them make this a habit.*

Chapter End Notes

My character notes for Arvense during outlining consisted entirely of the following words: "Swamp Thing discovers Dad Jokes." I like to think that translated well to the page.

Sorry for the delay on this chapter. It kept finding new ways to make itself denser and denser and life, as ever it does, threw all manner of wrenches into the gears. The somewhat abrupt ending is my Alexandrian solution to that particular Gordian Knot of circumstances. Next Time: Tsuga Explains Some Things, Cass Goes Shopping, and a wild New Character appears. Again, and not for the last time.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

In which an Affini cooks for the first time, and in which the character that actually inspired this fic in the first place is introduced. Welcome back, y'all!
Content warning for implied violence, explicit gore, environmental disaster (specifically, wildfires), and a really baked floret.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

<You can't be serious.>
<I am *very* serious, Tsuga. You should take her.>
<I don't know anything about terrans!>
<Then take this as an opportunity to learn.>

And so, once again, Tsuga found the little grey-stripe terran in her arms as they walked back to their quarters. They knew that Polyphylla had been right – that, of the three of them, They were the best choice to watch the injured terran – but that was a low standard as far as they were concerned.

True, Polyphylla was the expert on terrans, and Tsuga was expecting her to volunteer, but as the conversation with Nell went on, they couldn't help but notice the faint beginnings of wilting at the edges of Polyphylla's foliage. The cold had clearly affected her more than she was letting on, and she already had a floret to be caring for. Throwing a feral terran into the mix might be more than even she could handle at the moment.

Pisca, of course, was not an option. Tsuga knew that better than Polyphylla; in the short time they'd known the younger Affini, they'd already seen her rebloom once after an ill-advised expedition up a mountain face to secure a biological specimen led to her being buried in a landslide. As far as Tsuga could tell, the moment Pisca got even a little excited, all sense of self-preservation went completely out the airlock.

Which left Tsuga. Tsuga, who did not want a pet terran, had no intention of taking a pet terran, and who was already as tired of the cheerfully helpful Affini on *Tillandsia* as they had

been of the ones on *Karkenia*. “You look so down,” they would say to Tsuga, “you need a floret to cheer you up.” Maybe relocating had been a bad idea. There was no escaping the Affini impulse to meddle.

“I’m afraid that my hab is not especially suited for terran use,” they said as they opened the door and strode inside. Their main living space was a jungle of foliage from a dozen different worlds they’d studied, most of them as cold-adapted as Tsuga themself. Flowering vines lined the walls, hanging pots held specimens they were cultivating, and even the sofa’s structure was seeded with little needle-leaf ferns. Tsuga set Cass down gently and stretched, letting their tightly wound vines slacken and readjust as they lengthened themself into a more comfortable configuration. *Oh*, they thought, *that’s* so *much better.*

It was only afterwards that they noticed Cass staring wide-eyed up at them. “You get *bigger?*”

“I would say I get taller,” Tsuga replied. Certainly, from a more normal height, Cass seemed even smaller, more vulnerable than she had before. Perhaps the reverse held true, and additional height made them seem more domineering and powerful. “Most infrastructure on front-line ships is built with younger Affini in mind, and on top of that I bloomed from a species known for reaching rather prodigious heights. This shape is comfortable enough, given the local gravity. Were it lighter, I could stretch out a bit more.”

“You’ve got to be over four meters!”

Tsuga nodded. “Yes, that sounds about right. I haven’t internalized your entire system of measurements, but I know that meters are the basic unit.” They looked around the living space – it was all sized to them, somewhat ungainly even for other Affini, and utterly useless for someone as small as Cass. “I think we may have to improvise when it comes to sleeping arrangements.”

“I can just take the couch,” Cass said, still eyeing Tsuga as if they were going to shoot up another meter if she looked away. “That *is* a couch, right? Not some kind of soft-looking fusion reactor?”

Tsuga laughed. *Dirt, but she* is *adorable.* “No, that is in fact a couch. But I think you’d have trouble getting up and down from it safely. Down especially, with your knee. I could lift you, but you seem the independent sort, and I worry you’d try to get down on your own without calling for me. No, I think the best thing to do is to make you a bed of your own. It won’t be a proper bed, I’m afraid,” they added. “The compiler’s not big enough for that. And it won’t be handmade, of couse, but these are exigent circumstances.”

A moment’s playing with their tablet, and the compiler hummed and produced an acceptable mass of cushions, stitched together in a rough circle with a raised rim, stylized to look like a blooming yellow flower. “There,” they said. “I think this will do.”

Cass was still staring, but now at the bed. “You’re joking, right?”

“…no? Is something wrong?” They hefted the bed and looked it over, and it seemed to match the picture they’d seen on the tablet when they’d searched for “terran bed soft.”

“It looks like something a dog sleeps in,” Cass said. Tsuga wasn’t certain, but the furrowing of the thick strips of fur above her eyes seemed to indicated frustration. What a dog was, of course, they had no idea.

“It’s… unacceptable, then?”

“To say the least. Don’t get me wrong, internally I’m screaming about how what you just did, making an object out of literally nothing in *seconds*, is physically impossible, unless you’re pulling some kind of trick on me, but that seems entirely pointless, so– look, that’s something a pet sleeps in, okay? I know making people into pets is, for some bizarre reason, your *thing*, but I’m not a pet, and I have no interest in *being* one. Couldn’t you just make, I don’t know, a hammock or something? Something a little more dignified.”

“I think that can be managed, yes.” A search for “hammock dignified” turned up a number of options (though “dignified” had to be excluded as a variable, since none of the hammock build files available on the network used that as a tag). Soon the compiler beeped and churned out a long sheet of colorful fabric anchored at each end by a fan of ropes and a ball that, according to the instructions, would adhere to the hab wall and was guaranteed not to come unstuck at an undesired time. “We’ll set this up in here,” Tsuga said, carrying the hammock and the pet bed towards their storage room. “Originally, this was meant to be a pet’s room anyway, but I’ve never used it as that, so… it may be a bit cluttered.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Cass said, staring up at the mountain of boxes, each labeled and sealed, each containing samples of biomes, copies of written reports on said biomes, and the like. Tsuga had scrapped the bed and all the other basic furniture long ago, and so there was nothing in the room save the box pyramid.

“It’s just for tonight, probably,” Tsuga said as they attached the hammock’s adhesive ball to one wall. “Though Arvense may want me to keep an eye on you for a few more days. I don’t know. We’ll burn that bridge when we come to it.”

“It’s cross.”

“Hmm?” They looked up from attaching the other ball, the hammock automatically drawing itself taut across the breadth of the room.

“Cross that bridge when we come to it. Burning bridges is entirely different.”

“Ah.” Tsuga considered it. “That *does* make more sense, I suppose. Well…” They tested the hammock with one hand. “This seems like it should hold you. If you need me in the night, just tell the– oh. I should configure the hab to accept input in a language you speak.” <Hab, configure for Terran English language input.> Cass seemed conversant in it at least, better than Tsuga was at any rate, so it should serve.

<Please specify language options.>

Tsuga’s vines rippled. *Options?* <Default,> they said, hoping this wouldn’t end up being more complicated than they thought.

The hab made a chiming noise, and announced in a cheerful voice. “Hooray! Language settings set to Terran English! Just ask me if you need anything, cutie!”

Cass stared up at the ceiling, hands on her hips. “What was that?”

“It’s called saying hello, silly!”

“Is it always going to sound like that?” Cass asked Tsuga.

“Well, it’s not usually so… I suppose ‘upbeat’ is the term?” Tsuga said, copying the chin-rubbing gesture they’d seen others use around terrans to signify thinking. “Do you not like it?”

“Your hab isn’t self-aware, is it?” she said, crossing her arms. Was that a gesture of defiance? This seemed like defiance, which, considering Cass was feral, was unsurprising.

“No. Why would I make my hab self-aware?” The idea left Tsuga vaguely uncomfortable – she was having enough trouble with just one little terran in her hab, and the idea of her hab itself being a person made her want to shudder. The whole point of the hab was to have a space where she could be alone.

“Okay, I don’t have to worry about being rude, then,” Cass said, nodding. “Good. Because it’s really grating, to be honest. I’m a grown woman, not a toddler.”

“Toddlers are your…. hatchlings, yes?”

“… yeah, sure,” Cass said, shaking her head. *Okay, not hatchlings.* Tsuga thought. *Larva, maybe? They don’t undergo metamorphosis, though…* “You understand how this is a problem, right? Between the huge furniture and the house that sounds like a kid’s TV program?”

“… no, sorry,” Tsuga said. “I don’t really know much about terrans. I’ve only been in your galaxy about six months, and I’ve only been learning your language for about half that time. I’m here to study planetary ecology and assist ecological engineering efforts. Polyphylla’s the expert, at least from our working group. Hmm. She *did* mention that nostalgia was very important for terrans. Is childhood not nostalgic?”

Cass didn’t respond. She was staring off into space, her hand clutching her sleeve so tightly her fingers were starting to go white. Tsuga had seen Cass do this several times already, and like those times worried that they’d inadvertently touched on some trauma. They knelt down next to the little terran and moved into her line of sight. “Are you alright, Cass?”

“Huh?!” Cass blinked and took a step backwards. “… sorry, I was thinking.” She didn’t meet Tsuga’s eyes, choosing instead to stare down at the floor.

“Ah. About what?”

Cass took her time responding. “You’re from another galaxy,” she said quietly. “That’s– I was trying to do the math to get a rough idea how much energy a jump like that would involve.”

“Mmmm. I’m afraid that’s not my specialty, but you could look it up. It is rather a lot, though, yes – we use supermassive black holes for that.” Cass’s eyes widened again. This was not improving the situation “…maybe we should talk about this after you get some sleep?” She nodded mutely, still not looking up. “Well… again, the hab will get me if you need anything.” They set the pet bed down underneath the hammock, reasoning that Cass would prefer that to the floor if she rolled out in her sleep.

As the door shut behind them, Tsuga found themself lost in thought as well. They did not *want* a pet, but here they were, caring for a feral terran, and they were already tripping over their own roots. They had read through the curriculum, applied for all the proper clearances more to satisfy others that they weren’t avoiding the issue, but they were still woefully underprepared for this sort of thing. They’d expected to be dealing with nonsophont life and ecosystems that didn’t require the same standard of care that a sophont did – the sort of life that they *were* qualified to care for, no matter what their personnel file said.

They let their her limbs lose a bit of definition, fingers and forearms falling into drifting vines, as they considered the situation. Whether they liked it or not, they *were* responsible for Cass’s well-being. And they were, despite their reservations, likely entirely capable. Polyphylla told her, when Tsuga had explained themself to the limited degree they consented to when pressed on the issue, that ‘caring for sophonts is written into every cell in your body.’ And for other Affini, that certainly seemed to suffice. It would have to suffice for Tsuga as well, at least until Cass could care for herself again.

They made a mental inventory of everything they needed to do for Cass. They’d worked out shelter – that was solved, for now, but the next day she’d arrange for a proper bed and clear out the storage room. Hygiene! *Frost it!* She’d forgotten entirely about hygiene. That would have to wait for the morning, as they’d already put Cass to bed and she was *clearly* sleep-deprived, even to Tsuga’s inexperienced eyes. Food and water, ah! That was something they were forgetting that they could actually do something about.

Tsuga would need to cook, and they knew nothing about terran food. They pulled the tablet from their central cavity and began searching: “terran food breakfast.”

Ah. *That* would do.

The horizon to the south was on fire. The glow was bright enough to turn the twilight red, and streaks of fire rained down from the rapidly fading stars. The air smelled of smoke even here, where the fires had yet to reach. After she’d patched up the cut on her forehead, Cass had drenched a bandana in a stream and wrapped it around her nose and mouth to provide some kind of a barrier against airborne particulates, but she knew it would do little for the ultrafines.

The puddlejumper had survived the crash – with luck and a little repair, it might fly again, but for the moment it would have to rest where it had fallen. Cass had taken what supplies she could carry, especially the perishables, and stuffed them into her rucksack before setting out to the north, toward the foothills. She’d sighted Twin Creeks Station from the air just before–

No. Best not to think about that.

But Twin Creeks Station couldn't be far off, and she knew they had a repeater array. She could get in touch with other stations, start coordinating evacuation and relief efforts. Someone would have to, and she didn't expect much help would be coming from–

No. Still not thinking about it.

She found the road after a few hours, navigating by firelight. It was a small road, barely two lanes, laid down decades before and scarcely maintained. It connected Twin Creeks Station with the logistical centers of the farm belt down in the valley, and ultimately to Landfall *isn't there anymore*.

Cass gritted her teeth as her feet found the asphalt. *Inshallah, it won't be as bad as it looks*, she thought as she began to trudge uphill. *There are always survivors of nuclear strikes. Was* it a nuclear strike? The explosion hadn't looked or behaved like a nuclear blast – no slowly rising mushroom cloud, just a pillar of blinding fire reaching up into the heavens – but she'd worry about that later. She began tumbling down lists of all the times atomic weapons had been used in anger, from their inception in the early Information Age to the brushfire wars of the First Collapse to what the Accord liked to euphemistically call the Unification Era. Now Solstice would be added to that list. The casualty list would be long, longer than she wanted to think about, but there would be people still left in Landfall. Hurt, probably being slowly poisoned by fallout, possibly trapped; they would need help, and unless she was much mistaken she was the only member of the Central Committee who hadn't been in the city.

It fell to her to help them.

She bounced back and forth between the comfort of rote knowledge and the necessary grief of planning rescue and recovery. Underneath it all was the quiet affirmation that this would not be the end – they would fight on, even after such a monstrous, murderous attack by the Accord. They would rebuild, and plan for the inevitable invasion. They had time, Cass thought, for the Cosmic Navy would only take such action if they couldn't *afford* to spend troops on quelling what they no doubt considered a minor labor revolt. They had done this to prevent an organized, dug-in, industrialized defense from developing on Solstice while they took care of things elsewhere. Perhaps the rumors of a war with xenos were true. Perhaps the Accord had bitten off more than it could easily handle. The details of the why didn't matter, not right now.

So lost was she in thought that she didn't notice the truck, its headlights casting twin shafts of light through the increasingly smoky air, until it was practically upon her. She squinted against the light as two dead men emerged from the cabin, one holding a gauss pistol on her.

"Hands up!" he shouted. At least, that's what he was *supposed* to shout, Cass knew, but instead, when he opened his mouth, nothing but a choking, gurgling stream of blood poured out. A wide stain began to grow around the knife embedded in his chest, spreading across his khaki uniform, the darkness rendering it a black smear. The smell of smoke grew thicker, becoming almost overpowering, and Cass only noticed the hole in the man's head as she woke up with a start and almost fell out of her hammock.

The storage room was dimly lit, and the door was shut, but still the smell of smoke was heavy in the air. Coughing, she carefully rolled out of the hammock and onto her feet – her knee

was still numb, and she nearly overbalanced, but she caught herself at the last minute. Was there a fire? If so, the high ceilings kept the worst of it above her head, and she could hear fans somewhere working to purge the offending clouds. The door slid open as she approached, light from the common room flooding in along with a resurgent smell of smoke, along with the overwhelming scent of vanilla and maple syrup.

Tsuga was in the kitchen, where the smoke and the smell both seemed to be coming from. The entire thing was a mess, with bowls caked in thick gluey substances scattered all over. She was muttering to herself in her own language, glancing back and forth between her tablet and what looked like a baking tray. Thankfully, there didn't seem to be any kind of a fire – even if this ship was orders of magnitude larger than a terran ship, open fires on a starship were a terrible idea.

"Is everything okay?" she said, her voice still thick with sleep.

Tsuga turned to look. "Oh. You're awake. Well… yes, everything is fine, thank you," she said. "I'm simply cooking for you."

"Uh…thanks?" Cass made her way over to the kitchen with an awkward, rolling gait, careful of her unfeeling knee. Every step made it feel like it was about to go rubbery and give out, but the brace kept it straight, almost as if it knew to firm up at the perfect time. "What's on the menu?"

"I am making a traditional terran breakfast called *pan cakes*," Tsuga said. "Unfortunately, I have yet to make a batch that look precisely like the ones in the picture here, but chemically speaking they're identical, and I'm certain they're safe. Would you like some?"

"Sure," Cass said, rubbing the sleep from her eyes and looking around. "Should I just grab a spot of floor to eat on, then?"

"What? No, of couse not, sit at the– oh. Right. Hab, please produce a stool for Cass at the appropriate height for the countertop. Something dignified."

"You got it!" the hab chirped, and the compiler Cass had seen in action last night began to hum and rumble. "All done!" it announced mere seconds later. Some of Tsuga's vines delved into the compiler and pulled out the stool's components, and began assembling them.

"So…how exactly am I supposed to get up on that?" Cass said when she beheld the final product. There was no earthly way she could climb up it – the seat of the stool was well above her head, and there were no footholds to speak of, certainly nothing she could climb on without toppling the whole thing.

"Hmm. I hadn't considered that," Tsuga admitted. "Well, you probably shouldn't be climbing anyway. Here." Her vines coiled around Cass and lifted her off the ground, depositing her in the chair's seat. It felt uncomfortably like a high chair. Moments later, utensils arrived in front of Cass, followed by a plate heaped high with Not Pancakes. They were clearly *trying* to be pancakes, of course, but they were Not Pancakes. Pancakes were flat, fluffy, and a golden brown – these were more like lumps that had gotten the vague idea that flatness was a more appropriate state of being, and rather than being any uniform color they were pale in

some parts and burnt black in others. They smelled powerfully of vanilla, and when Cass cut gingerly into one, she found raw batter and, inexplicably, dry and powdery flour.

Very carefully, she set down her silverware. “You’ve never cooked before, have you?” she said.

“No,” Tsuga admitted, “but cooking is just chemistry, and I’ve been an ecological engineer for longer than your species has been spacefaring. The recipe was not especially helpful, I have to say – none of the measurements were in your metric system, but in one of those older systems where there was no real sense of how much of anything was in a given unit. Pinches, and such. This one was full of *tisps* and *cups*. Cups was easy enough, I have plenty of cups, but I had to guess for tisps.”

“I think I see where you went wrong,” Cass said, pushing the plate away. “I appreciate the effort but…keep practicing. Does that thing make food?” she added, nodding at the compiler.

“Well, yes, it can, but the documentation I’ve read suggests that cooking from scratch is preferred,” Tsuga said. “I *did* compile the basic ingredients, of course. I couldn’t simply leave you here and go to the grocery.”

“I don’t care if it tastes off,” Cass said. “It cannot possibly be worse than the shit Osbourne-Clark fed us.”

“Language!” the hab chided.

Cass stared up at the ceiling for a moment, then finally (slightly) lowered her gaze to Tsuga and gave her one of her driest looks. “Seriously?”

“There is a general preference for terran pets not to use the obscenities they’re apparently so accustomed to,” Tsuga said as she tapped away at her tablet. “I did *not* know the hab was programmed to respond like that. Hab, a stack of pan cakes, please.”

“Coming right up!”

“And you wonder why being a pet doesn’t appeal?” Cass said, sighing. “You really need to change that. It’s gone from grating to just plain pissing me off.”

“I meant to during the night, but I got caught up in…well.” She gestured at the kitchen, then took a steaming plate of Actual Pancakes out of the compiler. “Rest assured, I will read the help file for this language setting and find a way to turn it off.”

“I would very much appreciate that. And, tell you what – why don’t *I* make the food tonight, and you can watch?”

As far as Cass could tell, everything about the Affini ship was designed to humiliate and degrade terrans. Everything far too large, necessitating Affini assistance. Hab AI that treated you like a five-year-old. The bathroom had been nothing short of a transcendent experience, to be sure – Cass had scrubbed herself cleaner than she’d been in years and luxuriated in the

absurdity of a bath the size of a small swimming pool – but the clothing options afterward had been a long, hard slong through pages upon pages of the most embarrassing sartorial nonsense she'd ever seen. *Everything* with the Affini was some kind of offensively bright flower print that made her eyes want to retreat back into her skull. Tsuga compiled a mini-tablet for Cass to use, which did at least let them cover more ground, and let Cass turn the brightness way, way down, which offset the absurdly bright colors a bit.

The true humiliation, however, began after she and Tsuga managed to find a black tank-top and dark-blue slacks. (Tsuga said that the top was still pretty bright in the ultraviolet spectrum, but as Cass couldn't see that, she didn't much care.) After she'd put on the smooth, rich material and tied back her hair (softer and fluffier than it had been in a long, long time – she was going to have to trim it back), Tsuga had picked her up and carried her out of the hab.

At least she'd asked this time. It set her apart from practically every other Affini they met on the way to the grocer, the majority of whom immediately began cooing and trying to pet Cass the minute they saw her in Tsuga's arms. Each time, cheeks burning, she had to fend off offending vines and branches while Tsuga patiently explained that Cass was not, in fact, a pet. By the time they reached the grocer, a massive building that obviously had to include dozens of other, unrelated businesses, Cass was fuming.

"Does your species just not understand the concept of personal space or something?" she grumbled as Tsuga set her down.

"No, it really doesn't make sense to us," Tsuga replied. "Obviously, we understand it conceptually, but it seems…I suppose *unhealthy* would be the right word. How is your leg? You're certain you're up to walking around?"

"The doc said I could as long as it wasn't strenuous, and I don't want to just lie around or be carried all day. Besides, I'm supposed to be looking around and forming an opinion about the ship, aren't I?"

"I'm responsible for your well-being. That includes making sure you don't aggravate an injury."

"No," Cass replied. "*I'm* responsible for my well-being, same as anyone else. *You're* making sure I don't have a bad drug reaction, which I appreciate, but as I have said so many times since yesterday, I am a grown woman and I can handle myself just fine. Most importantly, I am *not* your pet."

"No," Tsuga said. "You are not."

There was something in the way she said those four words that tickled at the back of Cass' mind. A little too quick, a little too vehement, perhaps. In a terran, experience taught her, that was a sign that she'd either pushed something too far, or had touched on something the other person didn't want to talk about it. Granted, Tsuga wasn't terran, but she seemed to be making one hell of an effort to *seem* terran-like, especially considering she'd been at it for less than six months.

What to say from here? She had options. Push more to see what happened, and get more information to help figure it out – her go-to when she was younger, but a tool that had fallen out of favor, as it tended not to yield good results. Not every problem was a nail, and she had more than a hammer to work with. Give ground – not something she wanted to get in the habit of here, or before she knew it she'd have a worm in her brain. Conciliate – that might work, if Tsuga was indeed frustrated over not being allowed to do what she perceived to be her job. If it didn't, she'd have to dig deeper in the toolkit.

"Look," she said, "It's not that I don't appreciate the incredibly delicious 3D-printed pancakes, or the huge bath, or the fresh clothes – there's just a lot of culture shock going on, and I'm kind of a loner by nature. Why don't we just… take some time apart? Just for a little bit, while we're shopping, to cool off a bit. I can handle walking around that much, and if I can't, well, I have this." She pulled the mini-tablet out of her pocket. "You put your contact info into this, so I can get in touch with you if I need help. Okay, 'Unearthed-Hope?'" Had she seriously changed her username to be about digging Cass out of a hole in the ground? Then again, based on what she'd seen of the Affini, it was exactly the kind of over-the-top thing they would do.

Tsuga thought about it for a moment. "That should be alright. I can pick up the nutrients and things that I need while you look for the things you need for– oh, what did you call it? Shack shaker?"

"Shakshouka," Cass corrected her.

"Yes, that." She hesitated. "I know you are a very independent human, and that asking for help is frequently difficult, but do not hesitate to do so if you need it."

Cass scoffed. "Remind me to explain anarchism to you later," she said. "Mutual aid is not a new concept for me."

The entire building was a grocery. Cass simply stood there, staring, for at least five minutes, mini-tablet with her grocery list in her hand, trying to make sense of the scale of it – a sprawling, multilevel building dedicated to food. She had never seen anything remotely like it. On Earth, such plenty was utterly unknown, unless one were fortunate enough to live near the poles, and Cass had grown up almost as far away from the poles as one could get. On Solstice, meanwhile, under Osbourne-Clark, what food was grown in the agriculture belt had been shipped to Landfall for the almost exclusive use of the staff and guards, while prisoners were left with little more than stale Naval-surplus ration bricks and whatever they could steal from the food they'd grown themselves.

Things had gotten better, ever so briefly, after the revolution, and then had gotten even worse. Small surprise that Cass's stomach rebelled at the idea of being full when there was so much to eat right in front of her. It seemed almost obscene for there to be this much food – this much fresh, good produce – just lying around. She was still trying to figure out how or where it had been grown, the logistics necessary to do so, and more when she felt a soft, warm hand on her elbow.

“Hey, are you…okay?” Cass startled and spun around, her numb leg wobbling unsteadily. The speaker was a young woman with long strawberry-blonde hair that fell around her shoulders and hung down her back, and pupils so wide her brown irises were crowded into a thin strip around them. She wore a sundress, gold with red splashes of color streaking across it, and she couldn’t have stood any taller than Cass’s shoulders. “You seem…kinda out of it?”

“It’s… it’s just a lot to look at,” Cass said. The woman’s voice was as fluid and limp as her movements – she was clearly high as a kite.

“You must be new, huh?” Cass watched her eyes light up in slow motion, a smile spread across her face like continental drift. “New girl hug time!” She laughed, dropped her basket full of odd canisters (the speed at which it fell shocking in contrast to the woman’s movements, no more so than the fact that the basket caught itself before it hit the floor), and glommed onto Cass, leaning into her. Cass froze, but blessedly the woman was content to simply hang on rather than moving her hands about for no reason like so many people liked to.

Still, it was unplanned-for touch. Not ideal. “You can let go now,” Cass said, gently disentangling herself from the woman’s arms.

“Awww, okay, short hugs,” she murmured pleasantly. “I *love* this look on you! Did your Mistress pick it out for you? Or Master. Or Mxstress. Whatever they like being called,” she finished with a giggle.

“I’m not a pet,” Cass said through gritted teeth. Even the terrans around here assumed she belonged to one of these xenos. She shouldn’t blame the poor thing, though – like as not she had a worm in her head, and wasn’t thinking for herself anymore.

“Ohhh,” she said, nodding with a languid ease. “Independent sophont? Wow, we don’t have many of those.”

“Well, don’t get used to it,” Cass said. “Once I finish observing this ship, I’m going back down to the planet to make my report, and so far I can’t see myself recommending this place as fit for inhabitation.”

The woman blinked a few times, her eyelids falling and rising in slow motion. “You don’t? Wow, you must be *really* new. Are you on the Orientation channel?” Her eyes slowly tracked over to the mini-tablet that Cass had, honestly, completely forgotten she was holding. “They were *super* helpful for me.”

“I don’t need orientation,” Cass said firmly. “I’m not sticking around.” She was being inundated with enough nonsense from the Affini – she did *not* need a gaggle of brainwashed terrans adding their own sockpuppeted nonsense to the pile.

“Well, then gimmie,” she said, grabbing the tablet with a speed that Cass hadn’t thought she was capable of and tapping away at it. “Oh you haven’t even set up a username for your chat app yet,” she said frowning. “Well, picking names is hard. It took me *so long* to settle on Leah. Buuuut that just gave Mistress more chances to call me cute things instead of using my

old name, so it worked out! Ooh, I know, I'll pick one for you for right now! How about… Big Tall Hot Lady?"

"My *name* is Cass. Give it back, that's got my shopping list on it."

"Cassie McCutieface?"

"No."

"But you need a *naaaaame*." She pouted with an astonishing degree of calculated cuteness that even Cass felt powerless against.

"Then put down, I don't know….propaganda of the deed," she said, shrugging. She'd used that on messaging apps when she was younger, before she realized what opsec was. "Just give it back."

"Propa…ganda… of… the….Deed!" Leah said happily as she typed it in, followed by another flurry of tapping. "Okay!" She held the mini-tablet out to Cass, and when she took it she saw the (unnecessarily) colorful chat app on the screen with a message window open to someone called "random_seed." Even the font was eye-searingly cutesy. Leah had already sent a single message:

> <PropagandaOfTheDeed> Hiiiii!!! im the hot lady you saw in the grocery!!!! hope ur thinkin of me cause i kno who im thinkin of!!!!

"…random_seed?" she said, raising an eyebrow. She thumbed the app closed and stowed the mini-tablet in her pocket, where hopefully it'd remain safe from further tampering and identity fraud.

She let out a snerk. "Oh, that's like…an in-joke. Don't worry about it. But I expect lots of fun messages from you! Don't go ghosting me!"

"Is it really ghosting you if I've only known you for five minutes?"

"Oooh, good point. We should do our shopping together, then!" She giggled and glommed onto Cass's arm, leaning up against it and resting her head on Cass's shoulder. "I'm making a grilled ham and cheese sandwich, so I need… bread, and cheese, and butter, and ham." She started counting off on her fingers. "And anything else I want on it, Mistress said, since I'm cooking for myself tonight. I haven't done that for a while, not since…" Her eyes glazed over momentarily. "…huh? Oh, right! I need sandwich stuff, and you need…?"

Cass sighed. Clearly, it wasn't just the Affini that liked to meddle on this ship. Still, directions might not hurt – she could wander for hours in this place and still never find what she was looking for. "I'm making shakshouka, so onions, tomatoes, fresh eggs, a few different spices…lavash, if I can find it."

"Ooooh, that sounds yummy! Whatever shakshouka is, you gotta make it for me sometime!"

The fact that Cass did not intend to stick around any longer than she absolutely had to seemed completely lost on Leah, but then again that seemed like the case for a lot of subjects.

“Are you okay to cook? You seem a little…” *Completely out of your gourd*. “…a little high.”

“Oh, I’m *way* more sober than I was when I woke up,” Leah said reassuringly, patting Cass’s arm and sending little shivers up her spine. “I’ll have come down off the heavy stuff completely by dinnertime. You’re sweet to worry, though. Like if an Affini didn’t have leaves or bark or vines or anything.”

It took Cass quite some time to unravel that in her head – she did not much care for being compared to the xenos who, even if they *had* overthrown the Accord, had a society that seemed to revolve around treating humans like pets. Meanwhile, Leah chatted excitedly about practically everything that came into her head the entire time, individual subjects blurring into one another as Cass lost focus on the conversation entirely – but Leah more than ably filled the space. By the time she finally released her death grip on Cass’s arm and wandered off to find her “cheesy-cheese,” giving her a last reminder that she expected a dozen messages minimum by dinnertime, Cass’s own basket was full of everything she could possibly need, and Tsuga was waiting for her at the exit to the grocery.

“How’s your knee?” was the first thing she asked, kneeling down to be face to face with Cass.

“It’s fine. A little wobbly, but fine. Listen, how do we pay for this? Are there just tracker chips in these and the door deducts it from your account?” None of the few commissary shops on Solstice had worked that way, but she’d shoplifted from a few stores on Earth that had. A little copper mesh made for a big discount.

Tsuga hesitated, then, smiled. “Right. Money. You do that. Did that. We fixed it.”

“… I’m sorry, what?” Cass stared up at Tsuga – even kneeling down, she was *still* taller. “You’ve abolished money entirely? Even as a medium for tracking the flow of goods and labor?”

“It’s a pretty poor method of doing that when you have access to even basic computing technology,” Tsuga said. “You terrans could have done it even before we–” She paused, and frowned. “Why are you smiling? From what I’ve heard, most terrans get *very* disturbed when this subject comes up.”

It wasn’t a smile – it was an enormous shit-eating grin that Cass couldn’t possibly have restrained even if she’d wanted to. “I have some friends,” she said, “who are going to completely lose it – in the best possible way – when I tell them about this.” It was complicated, of course, and even if the Affini *were* communists of one stripe or another, they had unresolved problems that neither she nor many of her comrades could countenance. Still, it was an opening: once she gleaned a few more details and explained the history of terran socialism, maybe there *could* be a rapprochement with the Affini on mutually acceptable terms – terms that left Solstice independent and the masters of their own destiny.

After all, if Solstice was going to be run according to the same economic philosophy the Affini used, or one close enough for government work, was there really any need for the Affini to be involved?

Chapter End Notes

The heat wave is over, distractions are at a minimum, and my brain can function in writer-space once more. Back to the plant-mommy mines, brain!

Chapter 5: Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

The shakshouka was a marvelous success. Tsuga's hab was filled with the rich odors of simmering tomato and sharp, savory spices, the eggs gently poached in the thick sauce standing out against the deep red. It had been decades since Cass had been able to find the right spices – importing *anything* to Solstice multiplied its price exponentially – and the taste dug up an ancient memory. She vividly remembered the kitchen in her father's tiny apartment, as enormous in her memory as Tsuga's hab was to her now, him standing in front of the stove, her on a stool watching him crack eggs one-handed to drop them into the pan. His kitchen always smelled so good, even when he barely had enough to feed the three of them – a professor's salary, even if it was more than most had, didn't go far, but he made it count, and he always made sure that his beloved child got enough. She remembered his smile, and it brought a tear to her eye that had nothing to do with the onions.

"I'm afraid I don't understand what I did wrong," Tsuga said as she watched Cass eat, squatting down beside the short little table she'd compiled. It was more comfortable than the high chair, but it stil felt rather like Cass was sitting at the kids' table.

"Cooking is as much an art as a science," Cass replied, taking another spoonful of the sauce – it was heavenly. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten something so rich, so *wholesome*. "You have to develop a feel for it. I messed up a lot when I was just starting out, too." She'd messed up more than a few times on this attempt, too, just from being rusty. She was particularly on the lookout for a bit of eggshell that had escaped into the sauce and eluded recapture.

"Unfortunately, I've never been particularly artistically inclined," Tsuga said, ruminating . "I've been a scientist or an engineer of one kind or another my entire life. I prefer systems that operate in an orderly, predictable fashion."

"Oh, I do too," Cass said, splitting one of her eggs with the edge of her spoon and letting the yolk spill out onto the surface of the sauce. "I hate not having a plan for things. The only thing I hate more is when I have a plan and then the plan has to change."

"Mmmm." Tsuga nodded. "That *is* very frustrating, yes. I find it odd that you should be an anarchist if you feel that way, though. Wouldn't an orderly, structured, predictable government be preferable?"

“Anarchy isn’t the absence of government,” Cass replied before tucking half an egg into her mouth – absolute bliss. She swallowed and continued. “Remember all that Berkman I quoted at you? Anarchy is the opposite of disorganization, we have to organize *constantly*. We just don’t tolerate coercive hierarchy. Honestly, as far as I can tell, you’re *very* close to that ideal. If it weren’t for this floret business, you’d be dead on, and I’d have no reservations whatsoever about recommending evacuation.”

“The ‘floret business,’ as you put it, is the primary motivating factor for our entire society,” Tsuga pointed out. “The entire purpose of the Affini Compact is to ensure that little sophonts like yourself are taken care of. Sometimes that requires intensive individual domestication, and frankly, most Affini consider that a positive rather than a negative. We are, generally speaking, biologically impelled to adopt florets.”

Ah. Now there was a interesting choice of words, Cass thought. “Most Affini? Not all?”

Tsuga paused for a moment, adopting a stillness so unnatural that if Cass had passed by her in a forest, she’d have mistaken her for a *very* misshapen tree. “Not all,” she finally said. “For instance, myself.”

Finally, some headway. “So you *don’t* think making pets out of other species is a good thing?”

“I didn’t say that,” she replied gently. Cass had begun to think of this tone as her explaining-to-a-five-year-old voice, and it was becoming mildly annoying even if it did mean that, for whatever reason, Tsuga thought it was worthwhile to actually explain something. “I do, in fact, think it’s for the best in many cases.”

“But there are Affini who disagree?” Her shakshouka was going to get cold, but that was a very distant concern – this line of questioning had her full attention.

She gave a creaking shrug after another short pause. “Perhaps, but I doubt it. I simply meant that not all Affini *personally* want to take a floret. Again, for example, myself. My apologies if I confused you.”

“Mmmm.” Cass took another spoonful of the shakshouka and thought it over. “I suppose that’s internally consistent, at least. Why not?”

“Why don’t I want a floret, you mean?” When Cass nodded, she said, “Those are…personal reasons. I would rather not talk about it.”

“Fair enough.” Cass regarded Tsuga, her brilliant eyes shifting through shades of orange and gold. They always looked so much larger than they really were. They were large, of course, everything about Tsuga was large, but the more she looked into them the more of the world they seemed to occupy. Their hues bled out across her bark, vines and leaves, then stretched out into the rest of the hab, rainbows within rainbows like oil glistening on the surface of water that Cass was slowly drifting on the surface of, warm little waves lapping at her skin as they pulled her deeper and deeper into–

And then suddenly Tsuga's enormous hand was right in front of her face, and Cass's skin tingled in dread. She leapt backwards, her chair creaking and scraping as it slid across the floor. She very nearly fell out of it, but regained her footing at the last moment. The adrenaline washed away the lingering feeling of placidity and comfort almost instantly. "What the hell–?!"

"I think I may have inadvertently enthralled you just a little," Tsuga said. Around her palm and splayed fingers, she could see Tsuga looking away, vines and needles coiling like eyelids over her eyes. "I'm very sorry, I wasn't trying to–"

"What do you mean, *enthralled?*" Cass got to her feet, but Tsuga continued to keep her hand between the two of them.

"I told you, we're biologically impelled to take florets. Our ancestors evolved hypnotic appearances, biorhythms, even chemical secretions all geared toward that purpose." Tsuga relaxed a little, but still kept her hand splayed out. "You seem to have come out of it quickly, at least."

"You can just *hypnotize* people?" Cass glared up at Tsuga. "And you didn't think to tell me?"

"You didn't mention your species' ability to walk distances that would kill many other sophonts," Tsuga said. "…that was one of the 'fun facts' about your species in the pamphlet I read when I relocated to this galaxy, I don't actually know how critical that is to your everyday culture."

"It's not."

"My point is that, to us, it's autonomic. Like how you breathe, I suppose, that was also in the pamphlet. You don't think about it until something makes you think about it." She finally lowered her hand, but Cass could see that she still had her eyes almost entirely covered in foliage. "Like, for example, the clever little sophont with a great many opinions suddenly falling completely out of the conversation."

"…how long was I under?" She pulled the chair back towards the table and sat again. The shakshouka was still warm-ish, so it couldn't have been long.

"No more than a minute. How are you feeling?"

"…fine, honestly." Cass turned the situation over in her head as she ate another spoonful of egg and sauce. She didn't like that she'd been under for *any* length of time, but Tsuga seemed genuinely remorseful over it, and from what Cass had seen of her, Tsuga was pathologically honest. If she didn't want to talk about something, she said so. It was downright refreshing. Now that she considered the question, there was no doubt that Tsuga was her favorite Affini thus far – she may have had unexamined opinions informed by her society's ideology, but she was at least willing to discuss them. The others, for the most part, seemed to talk *at* her rather than *to* her. If she was going to forge a positive relationship with any of these bizarre xenos, Tsuga was probably her best bet. "I'm fine," she repeated. "Though, if there's any tips for how to avoid it happening again, or special sunglasses I can wear, I'd appreciate a heads-up."

“A heads-up…does that mean you want to be told?” When Cass nodded, she continued. “Well, you seem most susceptible to visual stimuli, so I’d suggest not looking directly at my eyes for more than a second or two if you can avoid it. And, if possible, we should probably spend several hours a day at a minimum in separate rooms, or ideally in separate structures, just to be safe. Even if you’re less susceptible to aural or olfactory fascination, that doesn’t mean you’re immune.”

“Hmm.” Cass nodded and was silent a moment as she finished off her bowl, savoring the last bite and running the spoon around the inside to capture every last bit of sauce. The stray eggshell was nowhere to be found, and Cass hoped she hadn’t swallowed it. “I wanted to check in with my comrades, anyway. Where’s th– *our* hab at?”

“Not far. You might be able to walk it, though I should probably walk you over anyway,” Tsuga said. “Other Affini might see a terran walking alone who, when prompted, claims not to be a pet as… well, as something of a challenge, I think.”

Cass pinched the bridge of her nose. There was just no escaping it, was there? “Is there, I don’t know, a particular color or pattern or *something* I can wear that is the universal Affini sign of *don’t try to make this one a pet?*”

“I don’t *think* we have something like that,” Tsuga said, contorting her wooden face into a reasonable facsimile of confusion. “It’s not something I ever really thought about, and I can’t really imagine it catching on.”

The old jacket, an Osborne-Clark all-weather model, had served Cass loyally for more than two decades, and would certainly be threadbare by now if she hadn’t mended and reinforced it regularly. The branding was all gone, either defaced or patched over with red-and-black flags, circle-As, and the most recent addition, a seal of the Pan-Elysian Anarchist Confederation on the back. It also tended, alas, to be a little funky, since it now spent the better part of the year on Cass’ body and there were precious few days outside summertime warm enough to go without it while it dried after a thorough washing.

The *Tillandsia,* on the other hand, was perfectly climate controlled, so Cass had taken advantage and given the jacket a good scrubbing in the bath, then hung it on a convenient branch outside Tsuga’s hab where it caught plenty of light from the brilliant artificial sun that stretched down the center of the ship’s open interior. By the time she and Tsuga returned from the grocery, it was already most of the way to dry. She wore it over the compiled clothes when she and Tsuga left for the other hab. It smelled a little floral from the soap, but it was still an improvement.

The entire residential block was absolutely beautiful by any aesthetic standard, Cass thought – foliage everywhere, and the scent of the earth and green things abounded even on the broad avenues between clusters of habs. The avenues themselves were like collages of thousands of perfectly formed stones loosely arranged, with moss and tiny flowers growing between them, as if to gently encourage one to walk there rather than to demand it.

She had to remind herself that, beautiful as it all was, it existed solely to serve, as Tsuga described it, the “primary motivating factor” behind the Affini Compact. She was still

uncertain how to square the apparently selfless desire to provide for all sophont life and the incredibly selfish desire to *possess* that life as pets, but she couldn't deny that the standard of living, at least in terms of material conditions, seemed to far exceed anything that any terran save the wealthiest quadrillionaires could ever hope to experience.

She had yet to resolve the conundrum when Tsuga turned down a branch of the path that led to hab indistinguishable from many of the others. It had been a short walk indeed – Tsuga had only had to fend off a handful of Affini eager to pet Cass over the journey, and the whole cluster of habs seemed lightly populated. *One more thing to dig into later*, she thought. "This is the place, I take it?"

"It is," Tsuga said. "The door should recognize you, since–" Before she could finish, the door slid open, the form of another Affini emerged.

"Oh! Tsuga! Hi!" Pisca said, her face shaped into a delighted grin, her needles shivering. "The hab said you were here. And *Cass!*" She leaned in close, her grin growing so wide it was almost menacing. Cass could see the little needle-like thorns that stood in for teeth in the mouth. "Finally! I was wondering when I'd get to see you again!"

"It's been less than a day," Tsuga said. "What are you doing here?"

"Tsuga, come now," Pisca said. "Phylla's got one of her own, and now so do *you*, but where does that leave me?" She made a performative little (not really that little) pout. "So I'm keeping these cuties company! We're talking about the bourgeoisie and the proletariat!"

"I'm not *hers*," Cass insisted, which only made Pisca look confused.

"And the report on the upper-atmosphere particulate composition I asked for?"

"I'm working on that *too*. I can multitask!"

Tsuga's foliage rustled totally absent any breeze, and Cass wondered if that was a sign of annoyance or resignation. "Go on in, Cass. I need to talk to my protege for a bit."

"Have fun," Cass said, slipped past Pisca and into the hab. It was, at least in the broad strokes, similar to Tsuga's, though the ceilings were a touch lower and there was far less plant matter integrated into everything. It had the feel of a hotel room more than anything, albeit one twice the size it should have been. In the middle of the common room, there was a small table much like the one Tsuga had compiled for Cass, in addition to a sofa, coffee table, several lamps, and what looked like about a dozen kitchen appliances in various states of disassembly.

"Cass!" Blaine was lying on the sofa, wearing a pair of shorts and incredibly bright floral-print shirt; he sat up as soon as he noticed Cass.

"She's here?" Nell's voice came from behind the counter in the kitchen. "Good! Hab, I need an espresso machine, minimum throughput six liters!"

"What's the magic woooord~?" the hab responded.

After a loud groan, Nell yelled “Please!” The compiler began to rumble, and soon Nell came around the counter. “Fucking thing will not shut up about that,” she muttered.

“I see yours is in kids’ show host mode too?” Cass said, putting a wry edge on her tone.

“Pisca says she can’t figure out how to turn it off,” Nell said. “It doesn’t matter. I’m just putting the thing through its paces by asking for the most unreasonable and random things I can think of, things they couldn’t possibly have waiting. So far it seems to be the real deal.”

“I can report that it makes some very good pancakes, too,” Cass replied.

“Pancakes, hell,” Nell said, grinning. “I made it gin up a chocolate souffle, croissants, all kinds of complicated stuff.”

“And it nailed it all,” Blaine added. “It was really good.”

“Hmmm.” Cass nodded. “Well, one more for the road. Hab, when you’re finished with the espresso machine, can I get a plate of baklava, pistachio and almond with rosewater syrup?” Just the thought of it brought back more memories of her father’s kitchen. If she wasn’t careful, the Affini would hook her by her stomach – they needed to get one of these machines in Bulwark that they could operate on their own.

“Oooh, *rose* water,” Nell said approvingly. “Good, good! That’s outside-the-box thinking.”

Cass shrugged. “I just miss good baklava. So, what have you two been up to besides trying to confound a magic box that makes anything you want?”

“It’s *not* magic,” Nell said. “No such thing.”

“Any sufficiently advanced technology–”

“*Stars*, Cass, must you?” Nell groaned, rolling her eyes.

“–is indistinguishable from magic,” she finished.

“Look, even *I* know that one, just put the brakes on your nerd shit–”

“Language!” the hab’s voice chided.

“There’s not even any Affini here to care!” Nell yelled at the ceiling.

“I walked around a little with Pisca,” Blaine cut in. *Good*, Cass thought. *He’s learning how to head off a Nell rant*. “We went to a little pizzeria, and then we took a ride on the transit system and she showed me all the different rings. It… seems really nice here, actually,” he added. “It’s warm, and everyone’s really friendly, and we have so much food I literally can’t even finish it, and… and it’s just *nice*. I keep worrying I’m going to wake up back at Bulwark and find out I just nodded off during watch.”

“Alright, sounds like Blaine’s initial evaluation is that it’s nice here.” Cass couldn’t blame Blaine for the way he felt – part of her felt the same way too. After twenty years of

Osbourne-Clark and three years of hell after the Pillar of Fire, it was hard *not* to want to stay in the lap of luxury. But he was young, and he didn't think long-term the way she did, and that was what made the niceties of this place so dangerous. She'd need to keep an eye on him. "We'll keep digging, but it's good to know where we stand to begin with. How about you, Nell?"

"Mostly taking these things apart to see if they work like they *should* work, and digging around on their network. I don't know if they're just bad at propaganda or they rely on the recipients being baked out of their gourds, because it's not terribly convincing stuff. Mostly, they just parade a toasted wormhead out to talk about how happy they are, how nice the Affini are even though they were quote unquote 'bad' before, and things like that. Bored me to tears."

"I ran into one when Tsuga and I went to the grocery," Cass said, nodding. "She was definitely high. Very bubbly, very outgoing, very clingy, and has probably already sent me five or six messages wondering why I haven't messaged her back." She shrugged. "Apart from that, she seemed like she was well taken care of. On the upside: they *are* communists. Tsuga was genuinely shocked when I asked how we should pay for things."

"Uuuuugh!" Nell groaned and let her head roll back. "On one hand, good, a species this advanced *should* be communist, but on the other hand I'm just *mad* now because this means the Posadists were right the whole time!"

"Well, I don't think the Affini used nuclear weapons to wipe out capitalism," Cass replied, "so if it makes you feel any better, they were only half-right." It seemed like a good time for a joke, and she smiled to make it obvious that it was one. Better than than a long argument about the relative merits of Leninism vs Trotskyism. "Still, this is a good thing. If we're economically aligned with them and aim to maintain an equivalent standard of living, and we make that crystal clear, they might back off on the whole *pet* issue."

"I just don't see how they can have abolished class only to reinstate it like this," Nell grumbled, crossing her arms. "It's not that I'm opposed to chemically managing antisocial behavior, it's probably the most humane way to deal with the issue of counter-revolutionaries and revisionists, but I sure don't see them doing it to each other – or us doing it to them!"

"Maybe we should ask if that's a thing," Blaine said. "I mean, just because we haven't seen it doesn't mean it doesn't happen."

"We can, but I very much doubt that it's the case," Cass said, thankful to steer the conversation away from Nell fantasizing about medicating opposition into submission. "Apparently it's an innate drive with them, something they evolved to do. But just because it's an impulse doesn't mean they can't govern it, as long as we give them reason to. If we're capable of resisting instinct, and we absolutely are, they should be able to as well. Right?"

It didn't feel to Tsuga as though they'd spent the better part of a day with Cass, and yet the sunline was already beginning to shade itself in hues of reddish-gold, dimming as it counted down to "sunset" according to the 24-hour cycle terrans preferred. They felt at once relieved and unsteady not to be looking after the little terran, but it was for the best, as they had said –

time apart would ensure that they didn't accidentally give Cass a dependency on their biorhythms, something neither of them wanted. Time apart would also give Tsuga a chance to clear their head, to think about something other than the very cute, very headstrong little sophont.

Besides, they had work to do. A day of watching her had convinced Tsuga that Cass would be fine under Pisca's care for a little while, at least. Unlike so many horror stories they'd heard from the crew of the *Tillandsia* about feral terrans, Cass didn't seem the sort to actively get herself into trouble, an independent sophont if ever they'd met one. A charming one, to be sure – somewhere, an Affini would be missing out on a marvelous floret, alas, and Cass would be missing out on the care a proper owner could provide.

"Hmmm. I don't see a report on the high-altitude particulate content." The Affini sitting next to them, shorter but broader, with wispy ferns and a mossy underlayer lending eir silhouette a fuzzy, blurred periphery, was paging through documents on eir tablet.

"My protege is still collating that information, and I'll need to look it over once she's done," Tsuga said. In the distance, they watched another Affini playing with her florets, slinging a soft discus that glided silently through the air for them to chase after. They were dressed in matching sundresses, and to Tsuga's eyes looked absolutely identical, right down to their hairstyle. It was extremely cute, and Tsuga felt a momentary pang of jealousy and frustration at their own shortcomings. "You remember Pisca, I'm sure."

"Oh, indeed. She certainly made a splash during the briefing." Andoa said. E shifted on the bench and transferred the tablet from one green-furred hand to the other; the empty hand, e rested on Tsuga's shoulder. It was a very terran gesture – Tsuga had seen Cass using it, and they supposed it was intended to be comforting. "Relax. Sprouts are just like that. I've been captain of the *Tillandsia* for some time, you know, and front-line ships like these see plenty. They always find something to help them settle down eventually. You're doing fine with her."

"I hope so. She's not my first student, but she's one of the younger ones, and certainly the most distractible one I've ever had. She's with the local terran delegation now, actually."

"Well, best that they're looked after," Andoa said, nodding. "The atmospherics aren't a priority anyway, the evacuation and aid process is – and what a thorny, tangled mess *that*'s turned out to be. You three told me these terrans were cooperative." Eir tone of voice made it clear they hadn't been.

"They were, if not perfectly cooperative, fairly reasonable for us," Tsuga replied. "They didn't want to leave, but as I understand it that's mostly because of how miserable the trip here on a terran ship was for them. Hence, the three they sent up to look the *Tillandsia* over."

"Be that as it may, my teams on the ground are reporting that they're being highly evasive about practically everything, and insisting upon distributing the emergency supplies themselves. It's classic terran hoarding behavior." E offered the tablet to Tsuga, and they took it – true to the captain's word, it was filled with incident reports regarding the ferals on the planet.

“That’s odd. They seem quite opposed to that sort of thing. When I told Cass that we don’t have money and that all material needs are provided for, she was overjoyed rather than terrified like the guidebooks all say they’ll be.”

“Cass is the loud one, yes?”

“No, the grey-striped one. The alpha.”

“Mmmm.” E nodded and took the tablet back. “I do want to meet these terrans. Tomorrow, perhaps, if Polyphylla is feeling up to it? If this lot as are reasonable as you claim, maybe we can finally start moving on the evacuation and get all those poor little creatures off that damaged planet.”

“I certainly hope so. I should caution you, though, they’re *very* independent-minded. Well, two of them are. One of them is a massive seed.”

Andoa laughed. “Tsuga, please, I know you’re new to the ship, but I’ve been dealing with terran feralists for years. Besides, terrans are *easy*. You’ve heard the joke about them, haven’t you?” When Tsuga riffled their vines in negation, e added, “They’re all seeds until you give them the care and attention they need. And you should shake your head when you mean no. Like this.” E pointed as they smoothly rotated eir head from left to right and back again. “You see?”

“Mmmm.” It *was* a pretty funny joke, Tsuga had to admit, but they didn’t see the point of mimicking terran expressions when there weren’t terrans around. “Well, I yield to your greater experience with terrans, then. I haven’t even figured out their gender schema yet.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it too much,” Andoa said. “They *claim* to only have two, even in the face of obvious evidence to the contrary. At least, until you domesticate them, then they figure it out all by themselves and will tell you exactly what their gender is. It’s strange: feral terrans seem to love self-contradiction, which would be almost charming if it didn’t keep producing systems that make them miserable. Anyway, my advice on picking a terran gender to emulate is to just find a pronoun you like the sound of and use that. It’ll all sort itself out from there.”

“I don’t think terrans can pronounce [illegible] pronouns.” It had been a long, long time since she'd moved the parts of her that made the rasping, clicking noises the [illegible] used for speech, possibly not since her last bloom. She had conserved them nevertheless; pruning or shedding them felt wrong, somehow.

“I meant pick a terran pronoun, Tsuga.” E paused, the hand returning to Tsuga’s shoulder. “Are you currently grieving? I didn’t see anything in your file about a floret when you transferred, but–”

“[illegible] was not my floret,” Tsuga said quickly. “Just a sophont I knew briefly, when I was still working in archaeology.”

“….ah,” Andoa said. Tsuga could just see, in their peripheral vision, the stilling of the vines and ferns even against what breeze there was. “I’m sorry, I didn’t make the connection. That

was blooms ago, and I was on the other side of Andromeda. I'd read about it, of course, but I hadn't realized you were there."

"I'm the one who found them," Tsuga said, "and I'd rather not talk about, if it's all the same."

"I understand," Andoa said. "If there's anything I can–"

"Like you said, it was a long time ago," Tsuga cut em off, rising to their feet and towering over the captain. "And I believe you have a concert to be attending. I wouldn't want you to be late."

Andoa looked up at Tsuga, eir eyes catching the light of the sunline. "You could come, you know. Ixia's floret has such a lovely voice. She's such a sweet little thing, too, you'd never think she used to march around barking out orders at the top of her lungs."

Tsuga unwove their form for just a moment, a brief respite from having to consider shape and expression in a terran mode. It *was* a kind offer, and Andoa seemed quite genuine, but sometimes that was precisely what got under their bark. They knew what would come next if they went to the concert: lots of cooing and admiring a talented floret, followed by lots of Affini they barely knew (or didn't know at all) telling them that they were in luck, the planet below had lots of adorable terrans and they'd *surely* find a floret somewhere among them, and *that* would certainly cheer them right up.

"That's very kind of you, but I have work I need to do. My hab is not suited for terrans, not even temporarily, and I… I need to fix that."

"I understand," Andoa said, giving Tsuga a gentle smile. "Just remember: I'm your captain, and I will always be here for my crew, and that includes you now. Alright?" E let eir form slacken slightly, the terran shape losing even more definition and allowing eir vines to emote in a more natural way. Genuine concern shone through, but so did a willingness to stand back until needed. Tsuga always found it so much easier to read their fellow Affini when they weren't trying so very hard to be present in a way that was comfortable to other species.

"I appreciate it," Tsuga said, and it was true. "Front-line ships are a new experience for me. I'm sure I'll adjust eventually."

"No doubt," Andoa replied. "Go see to your hab and your little grey-stripe terran. I'll take care of setting aside a meeting room for tomorrow."

"Again, appreciated," Tsuga said, bending their towerlike form in a respectful way before dividing their lower body in thirds and setting off in a rolling tripedal gait, one that let them make good speed without seeming hurried. They wanted to be as far away as they could be from others, for memories were welling up from deep inside them now, the world receding like the drawing out of the tide before a tsunami, leaving the beach dry and empty, only for thought and emotion long buried to come crashing in and sweep everything away. Their body knew where to go, while their mind wandered millions of light years away to one of Andromeda's cloud of satellite galaxies. There, around a pale K-class star, there was a green and happy world that Tsuga remembered as grey, cold, and silent.

The caverns beneath the dead cities were still warm from geothermal heat even though the surface was a frozen wasteland. They stretched for miles, lined with collapsing infrastructure and an archaeological treasure trove of artifacts from a species the Affini had been too late to save. This was not Tsuga's first dead world, nor would it be their last – but by learning what had gone wrong here, the Compact as a whole would be better prepared for disasters in progress they might come across later. They would know, then, how to respond in the moment, what could be done to expedite evacuation, remediation, reconstruction – what would be done to help the living who, absent intervention, might go down this sad path. There were other concerns, too, but that wasn't Tsuga's specialty. They did field world, not lab work.

They paused at an interesting formation of resin, some kind of tubing or piping, possibly biological in origin – similar structures, though much degraded, had been found on the surface. This one looked in much better repair, and might yield more illuminating results in testing. They took the appropriate tools from their bandolier and began to chip and cut away at the tubing – despite its likely organic nature, it made a clear, high sound with every strike, a sound that echoed throughout the cavern and down the tube itself. They cut away a suitable sample, tucked it into a container, sealed it, and began to move on.

And then, long after the echoes of their work had died away, they heard from the tube a faint and distant tapping answering them.

Chapter 6: Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

In which a meeting takes place and some illusions are shattered.

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> Hiiiii!!! im the hot lady you saw in the grocery!!!! hope ur thinkin of me cause i kno who im thinkin of!!!!

<random_seed> Oh stars hi!!!! i was just thinkin of u how did u kno????? ;)

<random_seed> I made grilled cheese and mistress said I did a good job even though it took me three tries to not burn it!!! i love her she's so perfect ;_;

<random_seed> Cassie oms ur ghostin meeeeee ;_;

<random_seed> Here lies leah, rip, slain by cassie who ghosted her

<random_seed> (Jk im fine im not really dead!!! im sorry if you were worried!!!)

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> Sorry, I was cooking, and then I had to meet with my comrades.

<random_seed> Aaaaa cassie cassie hi!!!! MIstresss jsut dosed me so i might not be 2 cohernt!!!

<random_seed> But im so happy to hear from u aaaaaaa!!!!

<random_seed> Did u make ur shakssha thingy????

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> Shakshouka, and yes.

<random_seed> Shakshouka!!!! i kno its probly the class a im on rn but thats such a fun word tto say. shaaaak shoooouuuu kaaaaaaa

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> Are you alright?

<random_seed> Im fine this isn't even a bigg dose!!!! and Mistress is here shell take care of me if anything happens

<random_seed> And it wont because nothin bad evr happens when Mistress is here

<random_seed> She wont let it

<random_seed> I love her so much shes the best

<random_seed> At least i think so im sure you think ur Mistressis the best 2

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> I'm not a pet, remember?

<random_seed> oms i forgot!!! dont worry tho youll find someone!!! or shell find u

<random_seed> Theyre good at that they always kno when u need them, they can smell it i think

<random_seed> I bet it smells like cake or ice cream or somethin nice

<random_seed> Aaaa i want ice cream we should get ice cream 2gethr!!!!

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> I'm not sure you're okay to go out if you're this high, are you?

<random_seed> Im fine!!!! it is almost my bedtime tho and Mistress is real strict abt that

<random_seed> Ice cream tomorrow then!!!!

<random_seed> Cassie hello leah calling cassie!!!!

<random_seed> Ice cream cassie!!!!!! mayday mayday!!! dont ghost me again!!!!!

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> I'm walking home, calm down.

<random_seed> Ice cream!!!!!

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> We'll see, okay? I just got a message about a meeting with the captain of your ship tomorrow, and I don't know how long that's going to take.

<random_seed> OMs u get to meet the captain??? thts so cool!!!!

The meeting space was a rounded chamber lined with broad petals that slowly shifted in hue, lending a calming air to the circle of soft cushions and low seats arranged in a ring around the middle. A projector mounted in the domed ceiling cast an immaculately detailed representation of Solstice surrounded by an orbital cloud of overlays, data sheets, and the like. A single mote of light, representing the *Tillandsia*, hung suspended above it, its orbit tracked in real-time.

“You know, from here, you wouldn’t know it’s so cold down there.” Polyphylla gave a full-body shiver that ended with her now-much-shorter mane of red blossoms – she’d lost a fair few to frost and was still in the process of regrowing them.

“Mmm. You can measure the percentage of the surface covered in glaciers and snow – really, just take the average albedo – and then cross-reference the orbital period and history along with a loose survey of atmospheric composition to inform a fairly accurate temperature model,” Tsuga said. “But, yes, it doesn’t *look* so cold from here. I’m glad to see you up and about, though.”

“It was *quite* the ordeal,” Polyphylla said, “but I’m glad I went nevertheless. My work with the terrans on Earth was almost entirely logistical, you know? I barely got down to the surface at all, and it was quite the uphill race to convince the Coordinators to let me take charge of the welcoming committee…which of course has blossomed into such a lovely opportunity in and of itself! I’m learning *so much* about terrans thanks to these cuties. And having an extended negotiation process?” Her foliage shifted happily, curling about like it was following a swift-moving invisible sun.

“It’s certainly not what I was expecting,” Tsuga stared down at the holographic model, mentally running down a checklist of surface features they wanted to catalog in person.

“Oh? I was given to understand you and Cass were getting along very well,” Polyphylla said, sidling up beside Tsuga. “Hmm. Have you made some changes? Your face looks a bit different.”

“I reconstructed it,” Tsuga said, not wanting to admit that they’d taken the masklike agglomeration of bark they’d been using for a face to pieces in the middle of their fit. It had taken them some hours to regain their composure following the descent into blooms-old memory, shaded by time but fixed in the firmament of their mind – hours, after which they forced themself back into a terranoid shape and began to clean up the needles they’d stress-shed all over their hab during their breakdown. “I’ve observed Cass speaking and emoting, and I don’t think my first attempt at a face was particularly good. I was just copying you when I shaped it.”

“Well, it’s a subtle enough difference, but I like it. What I like isn’t important, though – what did *Cass* say, hmm?” She made an expression with the microvines around her eyes, a fluttering motion that reminded Tsuga of wings emerging from beneath chitin. It was, if memory served, a sort of rhetorical teasing gesture.

“She didn’t say anything,” Tsuga said, confused. “In fact, I discouraged her from looking at my eyes, so she may not have even noticed.”

Polyphylla’s foliage drooped as if she were wilting again, an obvious expression of confusion. “Why in the Everbloom’s name would you do that?”

“So I don’t accidentally enthrall her,” Tsuga said, “because she doesn’t want to be my pet.”

“Oh *Tsuga*, don’t be silly,” she replied, a dozen or more of her vines slipping around Tsuga’s arm and gently probing for openings to wind themselves into their integument in a friendly

manner. “Just let what happens happen! If she’s meant to be yours, everything will fall right into place, and if she’s not, well, a little fascination here and there isn’t going to change things.”

Tsuga let out a toneless grumble and reluctantly shifted their bark to allow Polyphylla’s vines in, making a token effort at probing her in return, lest Polyphylla think something was wrong. “I don’t think we’d be a good match, anyway.”

“I think you’re feeling those anxieties again,” Polyphylla said gently. “And that’s alright. We *all* feel those anxieties from time to time, Tsuga. You have *no idea* how many times I questioned my own fitness early on. But like I said the first time we talked about this: caring for other sophonts is written into every cell in our bodies. You’re no exception to that. I’m sure Cass is very, very happy with you, *far* happier than she was living in that awful hole in the ground.”

“I don’t think she likes me very much.” Tsuga let a little of their feelings show, a drooping in their upper branches. “I don’t seem to be able to break through her shell. Every time I try to do the sorts of things all the primers say, it goes horribly wrong. She didn’t like the bed, she didn’t like the cute clothes, she didn’t like the food I cooked for her, she doesn’t like affectionate gestures from *anyone*…”

“The primers, I’ve found, are a starting point at best. Every terran, and really every sophont, is a unique little puzzle to solve. That’s the fun of domestication! Tell me this, what does Cass like? What makes her face light up? What does she show interest in?”

“… terran politics, mostly. She quotes philosophers at length. Berkman, Kropotkin, Goldman. I have no idea who any of them are, but she sets great store by their thoughts, though she also much loves to point out their errors or misunderstandings. I feel as though every time she tries to explain her *anarchism* to me, I understand it less.”

“The curious ones are so adorable, aren’t they?”

“They *are*,” Tsuga admitted. “But it leaves *me* feeling completely befuddled. Do you have any advice about this anarchism thing?”

“Well, I’ve been reading Marx after Nell brought the subject up, and it’s quite dense. It hasn’t had anything to say about that yet. It mostly seems concerned with linen. I *do* know what use-values and trade-values are now, though, so that’s progress, I suppose. Maybe you should start reading those philosophers of hers, and perhaps we’ll meet in the middle?”

“It’s worth trying, but–” Tsuga paused as the door slid open and Pisca strode excitedly in, the three terrans following in her wake. Tsuga’s eyes immediately sought out Cass – there, in her jacket that she seemed unnaturally attached to, and that was now at least somewhat cleaner than it had been. They ran down the checklist they’d memorized for gauging terran welfare, noted the pallor of her skin, the gloss and shape of her hair, her posture, her facial expression. She seemed well. Nothing terrible happened in the last few hours, then.

“Hey! Who’s ready for a *meeting?*” Pisca’s needles were all upswept, practically vibrating with excitement. “I can’t believe we get to see the Captain again already!”

“This time, I suggest you pause for three seconds to fully compose your thoughts before speaking up,” Tsuga said. “Did you finish the atmospherics report?”

“I did, and it’s been appropriately filed! Lots of nasty fine particulates still lingering in the stratosphere and refusing to coagulate, bleh.”

“Well, I’m sure we know how to fix that,” Polyphylla said cheerfully. raising her voice just a little so all the terrans could hear – Nell and Cass had both paused near the holographic displays in the center of the room, while Blaine had followed Pisca to one of the low cushions and was now sitting between her and Polyphylla. *Progress*, Tsuga thought. It was very sweet to watch.

“Really?” he said. “So… you can fix the climate, just like that?”

“It will take some time to compile the appropriate payload, of course,” Tsuga said. “Detailed study of particulate composition, chemical tailoring to ensure proper coagulation and precipitation, all while ensuring said agent doesn’t damage the ecosystem in its own right. And that’s merely the first step to a more holistic ecological remediation. But yes, we’ll fix this world.”

“Seems to me none of that requires us to leave,” Nell said, turning away from the holograms and crossing her arms. This, Tsuga knew, was a terran gesture of insubordination – frequently employed, according to the literature, when the terran in question felt they weren’t getting enough attention. Somehow, Tsuga didn’t think that fit Nell at the moment.

“It’s going to be the work of some years, at a minimum,” Tsuga added.

“During which we simply can’t allow you to languish in such miserable conditions.” Polyphylla disengaged herself from Tsuga vine by vine and focused her full attention on Nell. “From each according to their ability, and to each according to their need – this is, as I understand it, your creed. We are able to help, and you need help. How is this undesirable?”

“The welfare of the people in particular has always been the alibi of tyrants,” Cass said, not looking away from the holographic data sheets.

“Are you actually going to help me with this, or are you going to just quote people who have been dead for centuries and pretend that’s helping?” Nell grumbled over her shoulder at Cass.

“Like your body, your mind also gets tired; therefore, refresh it with wise sayings,” Cass replied. Her eyes were fixed on the holographic globe, now.

“Uuugh. Fuck you.” She turned back to Polyphylla. “Look, logistics is my specialty. We’ve survived for three years down there just fine, and even *without* your help we’d continue to survive just fine – especially now that we don’t need to waste resources keeping an eye out for a counter-revolutionary invasion!”

Tsuga knew this was not precisely true. They had seen the figures both from Polyphylla’s initial report, Arvense’s study of the trio’s blood chemistry, and the reports that were filtering in from the teams on the ground, and it was clear that, at least as far as the terrans at that

horrible Bulwark place were concerned, they were *all* malnourished and the outlook without intensive intervention wasn't a good one.

"Your conception of an acceptable level of survival does not match ours," Polyphylla said, as gently as she could. "You are putting yourself through unnecessary suffering, and we cannot allow that."

"So give us compilers and get out of our hair," Nell said. "We'll manufacture everything we need on our own, and you can go do whatever it is you do elsewhere! Problem solved!"

"Oh, are we solving problems already?" When Tsuga looked up, they saw the Captain standing in the entryway, eir biorhythms suppressed to a subtle level. How long had e been watching, they wondered? "Well, well, maybe I didn't need to turn up here after all. But then I'd miss out on all the fun, wouldn't I?" In their peripheral vision, Tsuga saw Pisca's needles bristle with barely contained excitement. If she wasn't careful, she'd start dropping them.

Nell gave a start at the sound of the Captain's voice, but quickly composed herself and turned to face em. "You the Captain?"

"I am indeed," Andoa said, wearing a broad smile across eir moss-streaked face. "Andoa Macranthera. Pronouns: e/em/eirs. Captain of the good ship *Tillandsia*." E gave each of the terrans a gracious nod, perfectly replicating the gesture, and lingering just a moment longer on Blaine than the others. No doubt the Captain's experience with terrans made his seed-ish nature impossible to miss.

"Good, finally, someone with authority," Nell said. "Listen, these three don't seem to get that we're perfectly capable of running Solstice all by ourselves. We're happy to accept compilers and technical manuals as aid, one comrade to another, but that's *it*. We don't need superv–"

"You haven't given me *your* name, petal," Andoa said, eir smile unchanged but eir biorhythms ramping up suddenly. Nell was pinioned on the spot, the words caught in her throat for just a moment. Tsuga was duly impressed – it was a slick move. If they thought they might ever have a use for it, they'd have to copy it. Finally, Nell managed to stammer out a response.

"Nell Cookson," she said, staring up at Andoa for a long few seconds before she shook her head and looked away. "And don't *do* that."

"Whyever not?" Eir fronds coiled in amusement. Even Tsuga could tell e was playing with Nell like – oh, what was the terran phrase? The way a horse plays with its prey? Something like that. "You certainly seemed to like it."

"Because that's not how you treat someone who's come to negotiate as equals!" Nell said, gritting her teeth and clenching her fists. "I know you're used to the terrans you have on board, who are so doped up they can't see straight and who do whatever you want, but that's not us, and you need to treat this seriously!" *Everbloom*, Tsuga thought, *she is really cute when she's angry. She'd better be careful*.

“My apologies,” Andoa said, all six of eir eyes fixing on Nell. “I must be out of practice. It’s so rare for the Affini to meet with equals.”

“We’re well aware of the technological gulf between us,” Cass said before Nell could respond. She was still staring at the displays in the center of the room. Tsuga had assumed that she’d simply been absorbed by the sheer level of detail – it was certainly something they could empathize with – but apparently she’d been paying attention after all. “But a technological gulf does not imply a gulf of legitimacy.”

“Ah, and you must be the famous *Cass*,” Andoa said. “Tsuga has told me all about you. It’s very nice to meet you, Captain to Captain.” E gave her another subtle nod.

“Likewise,” Cass said flatly. “Nell can go into detail about what supplies we need, but her overview is accurate. We need compilers and technical know-how; advisers in limited number are acceptable, at least until we figure out how to work everything on our own. Anything further will have to wait for consultation with other communities.”

“Mmm, I see, I see,” Andoa said. E used the chin-rubbing I’m-thinking gesture. “It seems unnecessarily complicated, to be perfectly honest. Why are you so opposed to accepting help? And, forgive me, but…why would you *want* to stay on a frozen slushball like this?”

“Because it’s *our* frozen slushball,” Cass said.

“We fought to make it free, and thousands of our comrades died to make that dream a reality,” Nell added. “Tens of thousands! We’re not leaving, not for *anyone*. They didn’t make the ultimate sacrifice so we could trade one bourgeois oppressor for another!”

Andoa was silent for a moment, and Tsuga could see eir fronds twisting. Annoyance? “You think us oppressive, having spent less than a week among us? I think I know where your misconception arises, though. Would you agree, Polyphylla?”

“Well, I haven’t spent a great deal of time with Nell for health reasons,” Polyphylla replied, “but from what I’ve heard, and from my time on the surface, these terrans do have quite a few reservations about domestication.”

“Which is not particularly unusual for terrans,” Andoa continued, “given the overall state of your society and culture. Your hoarding impulse in particular will likely take some time to help you overcome, but we are very, very patient.”

Nell glanced at Cass, and Cass finally looked away from the displays, her thick eye-fur bunching up together. Cass spoke first: “Did no one tell you that we’re communists too?”

“I believe I read something of that in the report, but I assumed it was a joke of some kind – every other terran I’ve ever had the good fortune to encounter usually articulates practically any word beginning with ‘commu-’ with no small amount of venom.”

“You’re *venomous?!*” Pisca said, leaning over Blaine. “That’s amazing! I didn’t know that!”

“Wh-what? No!” he said, his eyes going very wide. *Ah. Awe response.* Tsuga felt a warmth inside her core on Blaine’s behalf – he was surprisingly close already, even for such a seed.

“Hence why we fought a war against them,” Cass said, ignoring the outburst. “We want the same thing you do – for everyone to receive what they need, and for none to suffer or be exploited. Our goals are perfectly aligned. You don’t *need* to expend effort on us. Just give us the tools, and we’ll do it ourselves.”

“…*well*,” Andoa said, eir smile growing wider and revealing eir thorny teeth. “This meeting *was* worth my time. That’s a novel argument from a terran!” E laughed and knelt down, eir face on a level with Cass, and much as Cass did with Tsuga (or, Tsuga had noticed, with other terrans as well), she looked away. “I *like* you, Captain Cassandra Hope! You are a very fascinating sophont.”

“Glad you’ve finally noticed we’re not all carbon copy capitalist lackeys,” Nell muttered.

“Oh, I don’t think you’re copies, and I certainly don’t think your *capitalism* best approximates your innermost nature,” e said. “You’ve just managed to convince yourselves of it. Most of you, I should say. My, my, my, *actual communists*! I was so sure you were just terrible nightmare phantoms terrans invented to scare themselves into hurting each other for profit.”

“So we have an agreement then?” Cass said. There was some subtle slackening in her shoulders and her face that Tsuga only noticed because they’d spent so much time with her. “Supplies, compilers, minimal adviser presence, and full autonomy?”

“Oh my *no*,” Andoa said, straightening back to eir full height. “It would be deeply irresponsible to leave you alone on this planet, especially given how damaged it is. Tsuga will back me up on this – it’s simply not suitable for inhabitation at the moment.” E glanced at Tsuga with a few of eir eyes, seeking confirmation.

“That is my conclusion, as the welcoming committee’s environmental engineer,” Tsuga said. “Solstice requires intensive remediation that will take several terran years to achieve a viable average temperature for ecological recovery, during which time I cannot recommend habitation.” Cass made an expression that Tsuga didn’t recognize, but which certainly didn’t look pleasant.

“But worry not, little ones,” Andoa went on, still smiling. How e made that face for so long without it seeming somehow artificial, Tsuga didn’t know. “There’s plenty of room for you here on *Tillandsia*. I’ve already scheduled design and fabrication of new hab blocks to accomodate the increased population, so you shouldn’t need to have roommates for more than, oh, a few weeks. It’ll depend on the final population numbers, of course – I’m working from the records on Earth located by the Office of Transitional Neoxenoveterinary Archaeobureaucracy, which I understand are no longer accurate.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Nell said, glaring up at Andoa. “What the hell was the point of all this if you’re not going to listen to a stars-damned thing we say?!”

“I have, in fact, been listening,” e said, “and I find you to be a particularly refreshing batch of terrans, after so long dealing with your cousins whose behavioral responses were largely limited to ‘hurt myself’ or ‘hurt someone else.’ I think you will find adapting to life in the Compact quite straightforward, if in fact your goals are perfectly aligned with ours.”

“There was never any intent of negotiating with us at all, was there?” Cass said. Her face-fur was furrowing itself again, in the way that Tsuga recognized as an anger response. Her entire body was tense, like she might explode at any minute.

“Sweetling, your welfare is not something we can negotiate away,” Andoa replied gently. “It would be a grave dereliction of my duty both as a captain and as an Affini.”

“This is unacceptable,” Cass said, and if terran eyes could ever behave like Affini eyes, Tsuga thought, Cass’ eyes were doing so, seeming to shine with what could only be indignation.

“You’re stars-damned right it’s unacceptable!” Nell shouted. “We came here to negotiate in good faith, and you pull this bullshit? My first evaluation of you was exactly right: you might be technologically advanced, but socially you’re nothing but backwards imperialists who’ll do anything to turn us all into a bunch of wormheads!”

It was obvious even to Tsuga that Nell knew she’d made a terrible mistake, her posture shifting almost instantly from blustering facade to shivering fear as every Affini in the room turned their full attention to her. As a rule, Tsuga did not outwardly display their emotions, but they were standing before they knew what they were doing. Polyphylla had flowed to her feet as well, every leaf on end and seeming to vibrate with fury, and while Pisca had remained sitting, every single one of her needles was flattened against her bark in dismay and anger. All four Affini stared down at the little terran for a long moment, but it was Andoa who spoke first, eir voice perfectly calm as e knelt to stare directly into Nell’s eyes, all trace of eir smile gone.

“You will not refer to florets with such disparaging language again,” e said, in a tone that spoke less of Andoa’s obvious anger and more of *disappointment*. “You will not do so in my presence. You will not do so in the presence of anyone. You will not so do even when you are absolutely alone.” E leaned in close, eir form almost unweaving itself as e let eir biorhythms run rampant, eir eyes shimmering with hypnotic charisma. **“Do I make myself entirely clear?”**

Nell could scarcely muster the breath to reply verbally. Instead, she simply nodded.

“Good,” Andoa said, rising once again. “If you misbehave, I *will* hear of it.” As eir form slackened and rewove itself, Tsuga glimpsed something else hiding beneath the ire and righteous indignation of an Affini defending florets. All six of eir eyes were focused intently on Nell, as if drinking down every detail about her, filled with the predatory urge to *take*, to *shape*, to *care for*. Nell was certainly in no position to see it – perhaps Polyphylla and Pisca hadn’t even noticed, and the other terrans certainly wouldn’t – but it was a look Tsuga had seen countless times in other Affini over her long life, a look that said *I want you, and I will have you*.

“Stop looking at her,” Cass said, pulling Nell away from Andoa and covering her eyes. “My colleagues and I need time to confer before we go any further with this.”

“Take time as you need it,” Andoa said, nodding to Cass, “but not too long, little one. My preference is for the evacuation to go smoothly and without great fuss – it would be a lovely change of pace, and the best thing for everyone involved – but if I feel that your friends down below are at risk, I will begin the process of removing them for their own good.”

“Noted,” Cass said. “Come on, Blaine, let’s go.” She paused. “Blaine?” When Tsuga turned to follow Cass’s gaze, they saw Blaine utterly entranced by the gentle stroking of Pisca’s vines. “McCracken! On your feet!”

“Guh! S-sorry, Captain!” he said, swallowing heavily and dropping down off the bench to hurry after Cass and Nell. He paused at the door, turned, and gave Pisca an awkward wave before following them out.

“Well,” Andoa said after a moment’s silence, “that was very interesting. The way they tried to negotiate for their own isolation was particularly amusing.”

“I’m afraid I may have inadvertently created the impression that they could do so,” Tsuga said. They shifted their vines awkwardly underneath their bark. “My apologies.”

“No no no no,” Andoa said, waving a vine at them. “No harm done. If nothing else, it’s very charming to see terrans who don’t seem to genuinely believe that suffering is not only the default mode of their existence, but the only possible one. Still, I think those two might be trouble.”

“You don’t think they’re dangerous, do you?” Polyphylla said, smoothing out her leaves. She’d been perhaps the most agitated by Nell’s remark, but that was unsurprising, since as far as Tsuga knew she was the only one present who actually had a floret.

“Not in the immediate physical sense, no,” Andoa said, stroking eir chin again. E seemed quite fond of the gesture, and Tsuga had to admit it looked good on em. “But they’ve certainly got heads full of feralist ideology, even if it’s an unusual kind of feralism. Well, either way, we’ll take care of them all. Keep an eye on these three for me, will you? I have an evacuation to get in order.” With a nod to the welcoming committee, e turned and strode out.

“… I’m starting to see why e was elected captain,” Tsuga said, once Andoa was gone.

“Oh, my, yes. E handled that *marvelously*, and meanwhile I was so upset I could hardly join two thoughts together,” Polyphylla said. “Inspiring, really.”

“So cooool!” Pisca cried, her excitement finally boiling over. She flailed with her vines a bit, and very nearly came apart at the seams.

“I thought I was your role model,” Tsuga said dryly. They had no idea what *cool* meant – it was probably a terran word they hadn’t picked up – but it was clear from Pisca’s demeanor it was a positive one. “Or are you thinking of getting out of the sciences?”

“What? No!” she protested. “No, no, I definitely want to do environmental science! I just… well, you were there! Tell me that wasn’t incredibly cool!”

“I’m hardly the expert,” Tsuga said, “but I’ll take your word for it. We should probably discuss how we’re going to handle the terrans, though. I think they must have had their hopes pinned on this. Cass certainly wasn’t happy.”

“No, she wasn’t,” Polyphylla agreed. “And I think once Nell gets over the fascination, she’ll be even more vocally upset. Pisca, would you mind looking after them? And Tsuga, of course, if you don’t mind – Cass seems to get on well with you, and I think separating her and Nell might help to calm them down a bit. They really do seem to reinforce each other’s negative attitudes.”

Tsuga nodded. They’d noticed that as well. Even if, according to Cass, their philosophies were diametrically opposed, they seemed to delight in throwing all that aside to display inexplicable opposition to the Compact. *After all*, they thought, *if our goals are aligned, why would they want to remain independent?* It was a conundrum. “What about you?” they said.

“I think I’m still a bit under the weather,” Polyphylla replied. “And, I’ll be honest, after what Nell just said, I want to go back to my hab and hug my little petal for about three hours straight.”

“Then go,” Tsuga said. “Be with her. We’ll look after the feral ones.”

“Thank you,” Polyphylla said, the relief palpable in the subtle drooping of her foliage. “Please get in touch if you need any assistance. I promise you both, I have no intention of neglecting my welcoming committee responsibilities.”

“We’ll be fine. Pisca, why don’t you go and check on them? I need to look into a few things first.”

“Will do!” Pisca said, and without waiting for anything further strode off on her long legs. Polyphylla followed, and Tsuga was alone.

Alone save for the feeling in their core, that is. They’d felt it throughout the meeting, first as Blaine had all but curled up on Pisca’s lap, then as the Captain had, if only momentarily, tamed Nell. Tsuga had seen this sort of thing before, though not in such stark terms. Pisca clearly had her eyes set on Blaine, and the Captain would no doubt pursue Nell given even the slightest opportunity. Polyphylla, of course, already had her floret, a sweet little terran who had, if Polyphylla’s stories were accurate, been even more troublesome than this lot when she’d first gotten her.

Once again, all of their colleagues were finding florets to invest their time and attention into, and Tsuga was left feeling like the odd one out. If they had to name this feeling, they might call it *loneliness*, but a kind of loneliness that had nothing to do with the presence or absence of others. Perhaps even Cass would find someone, despite her professed desire to remain independent. Tsuga was torn. Part of them wished that Cass could become a floret, because she deserved to be loved and cared for just as much as any sophont did – more perhaps, given what she and her comrades had been through.

But at the same time, Tsuga found Cass delightfully interesting just the way she was. Complicated, yes, and always quite confusing, but full of fascinating insights and knowledge and ideas and behaviors. She really was a marvelous little creature, and the thought of her being someone's floret, belonging to someone else, having someone else at the center of her universe, was the razor-sharp tip of the *loneliness* that Tsuga felt.

Tsuga didn't want Cass to belong to anyone but them. It was irrational – they weren't competent to care for a sophont, scarcely knew how despite endless courses and texts and training, and Cass deserved better, deserved the *best*, deserved what Tsuga couldn't provide. And it didn't matter in any case, because Cass was far too stable, far too competent, and far too independent to ever volunteer for domestication in the first place. The only way she'd ever end up a floret is if her feralist ideology became untenable, and if Tsuga could do anything for Cass, could give her even a single mote of care, it would be to help her avoid that pitfall.

It was so little, and it wasn't nearly enough for the empty space inside Tsuga that they were so adept at ignoring, but it would have to suffice.

Chapter 7: Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

> For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

> Slightly short chapter this week, but I write huge chapters so that's probably less of an issue than my brain is telling me it is. Hope y'all are havin' a good one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The space immediately outside the building was an open lawn – if a lawn could, indeed, be broad-leafed, feathery, and dusted with unusually-shaped flowers that almost certainly came from some alien biome tens of thousands of light-years away, if not further. Still, it was a place to pause, to breathe, and to consider.

We are so fucked, Cass thought. The Affini weren't interested in negotiation, and that was the only route she saw that didn't lead to either mass domestication or a long-drawn out conflict that would be far harder on them than the xenos. *The best we can do is make ourselves not worth the effort*.

Nell was still sitting on the groundcover where Cass had set her, vaguely spacing out but slowly coming around. "Are we– are we outside?" she said, blinking. "When did…?"

"Good, you're coming around," Cass said, kneeling down next to her. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"The meeting? We were… that asshole was saying that they were going to take us off, and then–" Her voice caught in her throat. "I– I said–" She swallowed heavily. "Oh *fuck*, what happened?"

"I think the Captain hypnotized you," Cass said. "Tsuga did it to me once, accidentally, and I think Pisca may have been doing it to Blaine, but that was much faster and much *harder* than either of those."

"I wasn't hypnotized," Blaine said, crossing his arms and looking away with a guilty look on his face. "It just… felt nice."

“I can’t stay here,” Nell muttered, shaking her head and hugging her knees. “I can’t stay here, not with– not with *that* running around.”

“We have to play along for now,” Cass said. “But we’ll get you back planetside as soon as we can. We’ll say you’re going down to convince them to surrender or something. You’ll have to get the word out: lock down *hard*, go to ground, and make this”evacuation” as expensive as we can for them. Get them to just give up on us. That’s our only hope now, if they’re not going to treat us as equals to be negotiated with.”

Nell nodded, closed her eyes. “What about you?”

“I’ll stay,” Cass said. “Someone has to keep running delaying tactics from this side, and it’s probably for the best that it’s me. Tsuga…for whatever reason, she doesn’t *want* to hypnotize me. She claims to support domestication, but I think that’s just her acculturation talking. She seems really, really uncomfortable about it, and I think with her around, I’m probably safe.”

Nell was silent for a moment, then looked up at Cass. “I thought he was a guy.”

“What?”

“Tsuga,” Nell said. “I mean… I don’t know, that’s just how he reads to me.”

“Well, she did say any pronouns when she introduced herself,” Cass said, “but she just always felt like a woman to me.”

“Tsuga is an alien plant, Cass,” Nell said bitterly. “I mean, you saw that asshole Captain of theirs, I’m pretty sure it’s all some kind of weird joke for them. Like, what even is e/em/eirs, some kind of alien pronoun?”

“Spivak,” Cass said.

Nell stared at her. “What?”

“They’re from the early Info– nevermind,” she said. “It’s not important.” Now was not the time for an info-dump.

“I’ve honestly just been they-ing Tsuga in my head,” Blaine added. “I couldn’t figure it out either way.”

“It doesn’t matter right now,” Cass said. “What matters is getting the two of you down to the planet. I’ll handle the setup so you two can keep away from the Affini.”

“Wait, why am *I* going down?” Blaine said, confused, maybe even unsettled.

“Do you really have to ask?” Cass said, glancing up at him. “Just go. I’ll be fine, and you’ll be safe down there.” Blaine was quiet for a long moment, staring down at his feet. Cass knew this look: it was the I-have-to-say-something-I-don’t-want-to look. Most of the time, this look wasn’t enough for her to intuit what the person wanted to say, but in this case, there wasn’t much debate, and she didn’t like how things added up. “You want to stay, don’t you?”

"…yeah," Blaine whispered.

"Ex-fucking-*scuse* me?" Nell said, all but leaping to her feet, hands already clenched into fists. "What the *fuck* did you just say?"

"I don't wake up shivering here!" Blaine said. There were tears in his eyes, and his voice was dipping into creaky, achey tones. "I'm not *starving* here! I got to eat a hamburger yesterday! A *hamburger!* With real meat and real tomatoes and real lettuce and it was *amazing* and… and they don't want *anything* from me for it! How is this not what we've been fighting for this whole time?"

"Coward!" Nell spat. "You want to sell us out to the fucking *plants* for some cheap comforts? You want to betray the revolution for what, to be some kind of *pet* without a mind of your own?!" This was more than the usual Nell argument over ideology – her face was red, and her eyes were so wide Cass could see whites all the way around. Cass's mind reeled through a dozen possible ways she might defuse this novel situation, each spiralling off into dozens of branches as she imagined any of Nell's possible responses and how she might handle *those*.

"I just want to *live*," Blaine replied, his wet and red-rimmed eyes finally meeting Nell's. "I don't want to be miserable all the time! I don't know why you're so upset, I mean, they're communists, you're a communist! What, are you mad because you're not the General Secretary of the Alien Plant Communist Party?"

"Fuck you, you little traitor!" She threw herself at Blaine, and Cass was only just able to put herself between the two of them.

"Stop it!" Cass said, catching Nell by the collar and pushing her away from Blaine. "This isn't helping!"

"What, so now you're on his side? Are you going to betray the revolution too?" she spat, grabbing a fistful of Cass's jacket in turn.

"You know better than that," Cass said calmly. *There,* she thought, *that's an opening*. Cass forced herself to meet Nell's glaring eyes, choked down the roiling urge to immediately look away. *Let her focus on me*. "I've been fighting capital since before you hit puberty. You would have been, what, 8 years old when I blew up that logistics depot?" Nell knew the story. Cass had told it often enough, when people asked what got her sent to Solstice.

"…nine," Nell said. The first crack in the wall of her rage. "I remember seeing that on the vids."

"So you think I demolished one of the five biggest military-industrial shipping hubs on the homeworld, got transported to Solstice for it, then spent twenty years organizing so that, when the chance came, we kicked Osbourne-Clark off-planet – and then, after the navy destroyed Landfall, spent the next three years organizing not only to keep the survivors alive but so that when the Accord inevitably came back, we could still *fight them* – after all that, you think *I'm* the one giving up on the revolution?"

Nell was still angry, and when her eyes darted to Blaine, just behind Cass, that anger flared momentarily, but she was getting herself under control. “Fine,” she whispered, letting Cass’s jacket slip through her fingers, otherwise still tense from head to toe. “But when they open up your skull and put a–” Her voice caught again. “Stars damn it! When they *unmake* you, McCracken, don’t think I’ll feel sorry for you!”

“You don’t mean that,” Cass said firmly. “Calm down and listen to me. Underneath all that tankie bullshit, you absolutely *do* care. You think I didn’t notice you skipping meals to cover shortfalls in rations? You’re a good person, Nell, and a good comrade.”

“…fuck off,” she mumbled, looking away.

There, Cass thought. *Fight’s over*. She finally let herself look away. *Blessed relief*. “Go back to the surface, get everything together. Just do one thing for me, Nell: promise me you won’t go to Case Wildfire.”

“But that’s the core of the guerilla strategy!” Nell protested. “If we don’t–”

“And if we *do*,” Cass cut her off, “if we make them *mad*, they can annihilate the planet without even really *trying*. Make it expensive, make it frustrating, make it absolutely maddening. Make it not worth their while! But don’t you *dare* make them mad, Nell. Too many lives are riding on it.”

“Fine,” she said, glancing at Blaine. The anger flared again, briefly. “And what about him?”

“Blaine,” Cass said, turning to him, “do you still want to stay?”

He nodded. “You’re going to need help, and–”

“Don’t,” Cass said, cutting him off. “Don’t try to come up with post hoc justifications. You don’t need to. What did I say when you volunteered for Bulwark duty?”

Cass watched him remember. “We fight as long as we can?” he said tentatively.

“And if you hit your limit?” she prompted.

“Know it, and say it,” he finished, sighing. “But I don’t want to let you down,” he added. His tears had stopped, but he still sounded as if he were about to start crying again at the slightly provocation.

“You’re not.” Cass reached out and put a hand on his shoulder – he needed the steadiness and the comfort, maybe now more than ever. “I still think you should go down, though, and transfer out of Bulwark. I know a bunch of shelters in the Elysium Valley that would be happy to have you.”

He was silent for a moment, then finally said, “N-no, I want to stay here. I want to help you, I really do. But…that’s not the only reason.” He looked down at the ground, clearly ashamed of himself.

“I told you,” Nell growled. “He wants to be a *pet*.”

“Shut up! Just because *you’ve* never been happy a day in your life–”

“Stop it,” Cass said, squeezing his shoulder a little. “Both of you.” *I’ve lost him already*, Cass thought, her heart sinking. *I should have seen it sooner, somehow.* But she knew, too, there was no way she could have, not before Tsuga accidentally hypnotized her. Just a few days with the Affini had completely upended Blaine’s mind, made him empathize just as much with the enemy – and it was clear they were the enemy, now, merely a different shade of imperialism than they were accustomed to hating – as with his own comrades. *I knew they were dangerous, but I had no idea how dangerous they really were*.

“So…I can stay?” He finally lifted his head, staring up at Cass with pleading eyes.

“I think you’re making the wrong decision,” Cass said, as gently as she could. “One that’s going to have life-long consequences you can’t foresee. But it *is* your decision.”

“Anarchist bullshit,” Nell muttered, shaking her head and turning away.

“It’s your decision,” Cass repeated. “I’d advise against it, but I won’t stop you from making it.”

Tears were again rolling down Blaine’s face, falling to the ground cover below. He finally managed to look up, his eyes meeting Cass’s for an uncomfortably long second that she, again, forced herself to endure before something else caught his attention. His eyes darted away, and close as she was, Cass thought she could see his pupils dilate ever so slightly.

“There you are!” Pisca’s voice came from behind, and as Cass turned it was clear Blaine was staring up at her. “I looked all over! You know, for such little legs, you terrans can run surprisingly fast!” She knelt down next to the trio, one hand idly stroking Blaine – and only then did Pisca notice the tears. “Oh, petal, what’s wrong?”

Blaine immediately burst into sobs, anything he might have tried to say wiped away by a waterfall of tears. Before Cass could even react, she felt Blaine being dragged up and away, out of her reach and into Pisca’s arms. She gently cradled him, rocking him back and forth as her vines coiled around him. “Shhhh,” she said, “don’t worry. Everything’s going to be okay.”

Collecting themself had taken Tsuga some time, but they were whole once more, and once more in a position to, if only temporarily, supervise a fairly independent little sophont. Pisca had said, when Tsuga caught up with her, that there’d been some kind of disagreement, and sure enough, there was Blaine in her arms, his face red around the eyes in a way Tsuga recognized as a sign of distress. Nell, meanwhile, had not been quite so loud as Polyphylla had predicted – perhaps she was getting accustomed to the Affini? It was a slim hope, but the Captain had handled her well, and it might just be the beginning of her turning the corner, especially since she and Cass had immediately requested that Nell be provided transport back to the planet’s surface to present the committee’s findings to the Bulwark Assembly ahead of the evacuation.

Tsuga was surprised the two had agreed, but then again, Cass in particular was a smart little terran. Perhaps the Captain's influence had helped her to talk Nell down. In either case, now Nell was on a shuttle bound for the planet, Blaine was with Pisca (who had insisted he was absolutely in no condition to be on his own), and Cass was once more in Tsuga's hab, seated at her little table and scribbling away in a notebook she'd requested from the compiler. Apparently terrans too felt the allure of writing properly on a sheet of paper, and it had the additional benefit of being very cute. This made it hard for Tsuga, seated on their sofa, to focus on reading the hab manual – they still hadn't determined where the setting for the voice modulation was. It was a part of the habitat they'd never had to interact with, since the default Affini profile had always sufficed for them.

When the sound of pen on paper suddenly stopped, curiosity sunk its hooks into Tsuga. "What precisely are you writing, anyway?" they said, now that it wouldn't be an interruption.

Cass almost jumped in her seat before turning to look up at Tsuga. "Just organizing my thoughts. Works better on paper. I think it's the…the tactile feeling of writing. And it forces me to pay attention, and not just let my thoughts spiral."

"Mmm. I see," Tsuga said. They had a habit of using notes in much the same way, when faced with a task so large that even breaking it down into sub-tasks mentally was insufficient to fully grasp the whole. "Is everything alright?"

"Mmm." Cass nodded, tapping the pen rhythmically against the paper with a gentle flick of her fingers. "When you came down to the planet, you mentioned a treaty you made with what's left of the Accord."

"The Human Domestication Treaty," Tsuga helpfully supplied. "We'll work out one with you here. It'll probably be substantially similar. Though, you've been much more cooperative, so that will probably influence it. I'm afraid that sort of thing isn't my specialty."

"Could I have a copy?"

"You can find it on your tablet easily enough, I should think," Tsuga said. "But if you'd like help–"

"No, no," Cass said, waving her hand. "I mean a hard copy. One I can mark up as I read it."

"Oh!" *What a charming little creature*, Tsuga thought, warmth filling their core. *Perhaps I can extract a video from the hab's memory later. Polyphylla would just about rebloom on the spot if she could see that*. "We can arrange for a printed copy, certainly. Though–" Their mind darted to the hab voice modulation problem. "We should probably be quite specific, lest you accidentally end up with a version written with florets in mind."

"Good thinking," Cass said, nodding and making another entry in her notebook. "I need the full, detailed version. No abridgments, no omissions."

"I'm sure such a translation exists," Tsuga said, nodding. "Though that might add some time to the request. Generally, the full version, and the legally controlling one, is written in Affini. Especially for sophonts like terrans, who have so many radically different languages."

“So if I want to actually understand the real thing, I’m going to have to learn Affini?” Cass said. She shook her head and sighed. “Well, what’s one more language? I’m only 44…”

“It shouldn’t be too difficult, if you really do want to go that route,” Tsuga said. “The local Affini dialect *is* designed with maximum intelligibility with your own languages in mind, after all.”

Cass looked back up and Tsuga and stared. “You redesign your own *language* every time you meet a new species?”

“Of course,” Tsuga said. “Did we not mention that? It’s much easier than expecting you to understand the Core Worlds dialect. That doesn’t even use approximated mouth and vocal parts.”

For a moment, Cass was silent. Then, she let out a soft chuckle. “You know, I don’t know why I’m surprised when you say things like that anymore,” she said, shaking her head and adding more notes to her book.

“In time, you’ll grow accustomed to it,” Tsuga said. “Xenosophonts all do.”

“You’re assuming I plan to stick around,” Cass said, not looking up. “I don’t.”

There was a shiver in Tsuga’s core, a twitching and a contraction. *What does she mean by that?* they wondered. “I’m not sure what you mean,” they said.

“You’ve made it clear you don’t respect our agency,” she replied. “You, specifically, did. I’m still mad at you about that.”

“Mad?” Now the twitching spread, rippling out along their vines in waves of confusion. “What did I do?”

“You sold us out,” Cass explained. Despite her stated anger, her voice was calm. “You told the Captain we can’t stay down there.”

“Because you *can’t*,” Tsuga said. “It’s not safe or healthy, and it won’t be for some time.”

“But you plan to fix it.”

“Yes, of course.”

Cass stopped writing, set the pen down, and turned to face Tsuga. “Then why can’t you simply give us the technology to do so and let us do it? Hm?”

“Because…that’s not how we do things,” Tsuga said. “And it would be deeply irresponsible to place technology like that in your hands, anyway. If used improperly, you could wipe yourselves out.”

“Then that’s our choice to make,” Cass insisted. Tsuga bristled, each needle standing on end. *Everbloom*, they thought, trying to quash their anxiety at how casually Cass treated discussion of her own extinction, *don’t let me drop needles in front of her. That’d be so*

humiliating. Cass, perhaps, had noticed, because she added, "You know…you're the best one of you – you actually talk to me like I'm a person – but you still treat me like a child sometimes, like all the other Affini do *all* the time."

Tsuga was still for a long moment, turning Cass's assertion over in their head. *How to approach this without saying something that'll upset her?* "How old do you think I am?" They started to work the math in their head, converting Affini measurements of time to terran ones, so that they could have an answer ready.

"I don't know," Cass said, shrugging. "You said something about eighth bloom when you landed, so, I'm guessing, what, you're in your eighties?"

Tsuga laughed, a rumble from deep inside their trunk. They didn't even have to force it, and it was a relief to feel something other than worry. "No, no, dear one, *much* higher."

Cass paused. "…eight hundred?"

"In your reckoning, I first bloomed two thousand, one hundred and thirty…seven, I think, years ago. I might be off by a year or two."

"Two *thousand?*"

"My mentor in archaeology, when I first started working in the sciences, was on their Seventh Bloom at the time, so they'd be about twice that by now. I haven't spoken to them for a few blooms." *Never mind why*, Tsuga thought. *That's not germane to the conversation*.

"I… what?"

"The oldest Affini I've ever personally met was the subgalactic administrator for… I think you call it Messier 32? In any case, they were on their 28th Bloom at the time, certainly above 30 by now, so… let's say nine thousand or so."

"You're *immortal*."

"Not quite, but close," Tsuga said, nodding. "When faced with severe trauma, or when our biological systems falter due to age, we rebloom, a process of restoration and rebirth. The youngest Affini you've met is Pisca. She's not *quite* a child, but she's very, very young. Don't let her being in her Third Bloom fool you, she's only about three times your age. She's just nearly died twice, and had to rebloom to survive. Any Affini with even a dollop of common sense would still be in her First Bloom for at least a century to come at her age."

"You treat me like a child," Cass said, her voice soft enough to almost be a whisper, "because to you, I *am* one."

"Again, not quite," Tsuga said. "We recognize that sophonts live across different scales of time, mature at different rates. But on a species level, we do have a vast trove of experience to call upon, one that greatly exceeds your own. On that scale, as an analogy, perhaps it's not so far off: as you would surely not give a terran hatchling a dangerous machine to play with,

we would not give a younger, less experienced culture a tool with which they might cause themselves or others harm."

Cass was silent for a long moment after that, and Tsuga let her have her space. *No doubt that's a shock to her,* they thought, *but it's important that she understand our relative positions*. *Our responsibility*.

"I think," she finally said, "I need to get some air. I'm going to take a walk."

"Very well. Would you like company?" Cass shook her head. "Well, at least take your tablet with you," Tsuga said. "That way, if you need me to tell another Affini to leave you be, you can call me. Alright?" She nodded, picked up the mini-tablet off the table, shrugged on her jacket, and tucked it into the pocket. She left without a word, the door silently sliding shut behind her.

Tsuga sat alone with their thoughts. They had begun the work of clearing out the pet room of their stacked boxes of reports and studies. Perhaps they should finish that, and… yes, there was more they could do to help Cass feel safe and welcome in their hab. They lifted the tablet, their vines tapping in commands as they searched for the perfect addition to the hab's furniture.

<random_seed> Caaaasssssiiiiiieee

<random_seed> Cassie cassie cassie cassie

<random_seed> Oh yeah the meeting!!!!! oms say hi to the captain for me!!!!

<random_seed> Cassie is the meeting done yet????? im bored!!!!

<random_seed> Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!!!

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> Hi

<random_seed> Cassie!!! yay!!!!! how was the meeting???

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> Not too great.

<random_seed> Oh no!!!!! what happened???

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> It's complicated. Basically, it just didn't go how I was expecting, or how I wanted, and now things are a huge mess.

<random_seed> Yikes!!!! have you asked for help??? im sure theres someone who can help!!! do you want me to go ask Mistress if she can help you???

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> No, that's kind of the opposite of what I want.

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> The Affini want to stick their noses into our business and don't trust us to do things on our own.

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> I know they don't have noses, not really. Maybe those antennae things, but that doesn't sound right, does it? For sticking into things, I mean.

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> ...Leah? Are you okay?

<random_seed> Sorry!! i zoned out a little but im okay!!! booo im sorry why arent they letting you do stuff??? is it dangerous???

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> They say it is, but I think it's more that they just don't trust us not to immediately screw everything up because we're practically early hominids by comparison to them.

<random_seed> Ooooohhhhhh you met a real old one didnt you??? they can be real spooky sometimes!!! but theyre nice too my Mistress knows a couple older Affini and theyre always super nice to me

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> I'm sure they are, but nice to you and nice to me are two different things.

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> It's frustrating to be told that everything you've worked your entire life for is meaningless now because someone else is going do it for you, and without even really asking for your input.

<random_seed> You sound sad ;_; lets go get lunch im hungry!!!! Mistress snuggled me a whole lot earlier but now shes doin work stuff and i dont wanna bug her for food while shes busy

<random_seed> If i ask nice and say im gonna meet someone im sure shell be ok with me going out

<random_seed> Theres a cafe super close to where i live do u wanna go there????

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> I am kind of hungry. Sure.

<random_seed> Yay!!!! its a date!!!

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> ...wait, what?

Chapter End Notes

It's a date~! Tune in next time for (shock!) a date????

Chapter 8: Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

In which we get a new viewpoint character. Gasp! It's not just Tsuga and Cass?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the wind hit Nell's face and stung just a little, and when the slightly acrid odor of the local plant life filled her nostrils, and when she felt the hard ground beneath her feet and saw the horizon stretching out and vanishing instead of climbing up to meet itself overhead, she thought, *I never would have thought I'd miss this*.

Still, it wasn't the Bulwark she remembered. The old landing pad was gone, completely obliterated by an even larger landing pad that the Affini must have constructed in the scant few days she'd been gone. There was a massive ship squatting on it next to the smaller shuttle, a streamlined oblong craft that would have been called a cutter or even a small frigate in the Cosmic Navy. It felt wrong that a ship so large should ever touch the atmosphere, but there it was.

And the new tarmac was only the beginning. The bunker itself was absolutely covered in vines that flowered in a riotous display of color, and new structures that reminded Nell more than a little of the habs on the Affini ship in orbit were already lining the hill it. It was warmer than it should be, much warmer. The snow around Bulwark and the massive tarmac, out to at least a hundred meters, had melted months ahead of schedule, and new green growth was everywhere – and so were the Affini, moving to and fro or huddling in conversation close to the hemispheres mounted in the tarmac that glowed ruddy orange. Nell did her best to remain unnoticed as she got as far away as she could from the shuttle and the stars-damned Affini on board that hadn't given her a moment's peace the entire trip down, but alas, one spotted her.

"Hello there, little one!" it said, leaning down with a parody of a grin on its wooden face. "You must be one of the cuties who went up the ship to take a look around. I hope you had a good time! Is there anything I can help you with?"

“You can get out of my way,” Nell said, weaving her way around the enormous plant and averting her eyes. She wasn’t about to let one of these things inside her head her again. “I have work to do.”

“Well, you know where to find me if you change your mind~” it called after her. “And if you can’t find me, just ask for Vella Ruellia, First Bloom!”

Fuck that, she thought to herself. If she never saw another one of these stars-damned plants again, it’d be too soon. She shuddered and suppressed the memory that kept resurfacing in the back of her mind, like an itch she couldn’t scratch. “Nikolai!” she called as she descended into the bunker. “Niko! Where are you?”

“Nell?!” Her eyes were still adjusting, and she didn’t see the big brute until he was almost on top of her, wrapping his arms around her and lifting her up off the floor in a big bear hug. “You’re back! Fuck, we thought you were a goner!”

“I’m *fine*, dipshit,” she grunted, kicking out to find the ground below her feet once more. “But we’ve got problems. Why the hell are the plants building all this shit? Did the Assembly okay this?”

“No, they just started doing it without even asking,” Niko said, shaking his head and letting her down gently. “They landed in a big motherfucker of a shuttle, like, it made an Atlas Heavy look shrimpy, almost right after you left.”

“And you didn’t stop them?”

“We tried.” Another voice, Trish. Nell’s eyes were starting to adjust to the gloom again, and she picked out the other woman amidst the traces of yellow-green still swimming in her vision. “A couple of us did, anyway – and they just got tied up in vines and gassed. They took them on their ships and we haven’t seen them since.”

“Off to the fucking breeding pits, no doubt,” Niko grumbled.

“There’s no breeding pits,” Nell said, “at least not that I saw. Maybe they kept that stuff away from us, I don’t know, but frankly, what I *did* see was enough to tell me that we have to abandon Bulwark *immediately*. Get everyone out – they are *not safe*.”

“They’re arrogant,” Trish said, “and they don’t seem to care what we think, but I don’t know about dangerous.” She crossed her arms and glanced up the stairs to the outside. “Honestly, they make such a fuss about worrying that we’ll get hurt, it’s like they’ve all got anxiety.”

“Not dangerous like that,” Nell said. “They get inside your head, hypnotize you, rearrange your thoughts until they’ve got you thinking that you want what *they* want – that you *want* to be their helpless little pet. *That’s* what domestication means.”

Niko and Trish stared at her. “You’re fucking kidding,” Niko finally said.

“I wish,” Nell said. “I’ve seen it. Economically, they’ve achieved a worker’s paradise – no scarcity, no money, not only necessities but *luxuries* provided gratis – but socially they’re a

regressive imperialist state with an immutable caste system that sets them above literally all other life in the universe."

"…this explains a lot," Trish said, nodding. "The way some of us have started acting around them, and they way the Affini respond to it. It's very aww-look-at-the-puppy, now that I think about it. I thought they were just condescending jerks like Nikolai."

"Fuck off, bitch," Niko said.

"Don't you fuck-off-bitch *me*," she spat back, staring Nikolai down even though he had a head of height and probably about forty pounds on her. "You want to rein in your man here, Nell? He's been acting like he runs the place while you and Cass were gone. *Which he does not*," she added, jabbing a finger into his chest. "We have a chain of command here, and it does not step aside because your macho ass needs to feel important!"

"Can we not fight each other?" Nell said. "Both of you, shut the fuck up. We have bigger problems. How many people have the Affini compromised?"

"Twenty or thirty, maybe," Nikolai said, still glaring down at Trish. "Ten or fifteen full-on plantfuckers. The others are questionable."

"Plantfuckers?" Trish said. "Does everything have to be about sex and domination with you?"

"Did I not say *knock it the fuck off*?" Nell said. "Alright, we leave out the questionable ones during preparation, but I'm not abandoning anyone to these things. Once we're ready to go, we bolt. If anyone balks… we incapacitate them, bring them with us, deprogram them later."

"Even the plantfuckers?" Nikolai said.

"Even the plantfuckers," Nell said. "They have operational knowledge of Bulwark. That's not much, we compartmentalized for a reason, but they'll know things about the populations they came from, maybe even where their shelters are in a couple cases."

"Not gonna be fun, lugging a bunch of traitors over the mountains," Niko grumbled.

"Hold on," Trish said. "We can't just unilaterally decide this. We have a process, and right now we don't even have a quorum. Where's Cass?"

"Cass…Cass is still up there," Nell said, her fingers clenching into fists. "She's fighting a rear guard action, delaying them while we get out. The plants have some kind of a fetish for bureaucracy, and she's going to exploit that to the fullest. You know Cass," she added, smiling just a little. "She'll Roberts-Rules them into the fucking ground."

"Stars," Trish whispered. "That's–" She went silent, unable to find the words. Finally, she added, "What about Blaine?"

Nell's gut twisted. She would have loved nothing more than to ensure the traitor – the *plantfucker*, good word – would go down in history as a betrayer of the revolution. It was

nothing more than he deserved, abandoning them to be a fucking ~~wormhead~~ ***You will not refer to florets with such disparaging language again.***

It was like ice down the back of her shirt every time, even when she ran up against it in her thoughts. Her stomach turned over, and she thought she might be sick as memory flooded back in – the hours she'd spent staring mindlessly up into the plant's six shining eyes, the hours rooted to the spot, the hours lost in an abyss of color and compliance. Her mind had opened up like a flower blossoming, spreading itself open as those terrible, beautiful eyes seemed to peruse every thought she had one by one. Hours, hours, hours.

Hours that, she'd found out later, couldn't have been more than thirty seconds. *It's not here*, she thought. *It can't hurt you. It can't do that again*. She took a deep breath, steadied herself. Right now, learning that less than three days of exposure to an Affini could completely reorder one's mind would destroy morale. Maybe she could cast him as a revolutionary martyr? Undeserved, and she had Cass for that, since the odds of her escaping from the Affini ship were slim to none. No, for now, just damage control and a bit of temporary unearned valor for the traitor. "He's up there too," she said, "assisting Cass."

"That little fairy had the balls to stay behind?" Niko said. He clearly didn't believe it.

"*Wow*," Trish said. "Seriously?"

"The revolution has a way of inspiring the people," Nell said, "and of revealing hidden depths and strengths. So yes, he stayed behind." She met Niko's eyes and gave him the Shut Up And Drop It look. He shut up and dropped it. *Good dog*, she thought, then paused. *No. Can't make that joke. It's not funny anymore*. "So, we're operating under military contingency. No time for debate in the Strategic Assembly. I want us out of here within 24 hours. Be paranoid," she said, looking first to Trish and then to Niko. "Do not, under any circumstances, talk about this with anyone you even so much as suspect the Affini might have suborned. If anyone asks, just say it's a storage reorganization – I got back and saw what a mess everything is, and I have a burr up my ass about it as usual. Got it?"

"Got it," Trish said, nodding. Niko said nothing, but after a moment nodded as well.

"Alright," Nell said. "Let's get to work, comrades."

THE CUDDLE PUDDLE – Our take on the classic French Dip. Tri-tip with pepper jack and special seasonings on a sourdough roll served alongside our signature aus jous.

THE CLASS Z – Four kinds of cold cuts, three kinds of cheese, two dueling spreads, one foot long. Get ready for the mid-afternoon nap you're gonna want after this!

THE SWEET THING – Your choice of meat or meatless on sweet brioche, topped with fresh swiss chard, grilled sweet onion, and our secret sweet-and-savory sauce. For guests with a real sweet tooth!

THE CLASS A – Fried chicken on toasted sourdough topped with crunchy quick-pickled carrots, cucumber, and red onions. Choose a heat level: Warm and Fuzzy, Adventurous, or

Help Me, Mistress! Comes with a glass of milk, just in case.

And that was only how the menu started. Cass scanned the full length of the thing, one sandwich after another, all with similarly incomprehensible names. *Why not just call it a spicy chicken sandwich?* she thought. *And what even* is *a CLASS A?*

"Are you, like… okay?" Leah said, blinking slowly at Cass. In theory, she was meant to be seated across the terran-scale booth from Cass, but ever since they'd sat down she'd been edging around its curved seat to get closer to her, inch by inch. "There isn't any rush, but uhm… I think it's been like ten minutes?"

"More like fifteen," Cass said, not looking up. "You zoned out for a bit." It had been amusing, and a little bit cute even, watching her play with her hair like a cat that had found a bit of string. It had not, unfortunately, helped her make a decision. She'd spent much of the time simply looking around, avoiding the analysis paralysis every glance at the menu gave her. The cafe looked deceptively normal, if one ignored the scale of it, like a bespoke and high-end version of any of a half-dozen franchise restaurants she could name from her youth. The tables were made of real wood, the walls were covered in decoration best described as eclectic, and music was playing softly from speakers Cass couldn't quite locate.

"Ohh, right," Leah said, giggling. "Mistress gave me a bunch of Class A earlier when she went all snuggle-time on me, and I'm kinda still coming down from it. Mmmmm." She bit her lip and wiggled back and forth. "I never get tired of that. Buuuuut, uhmm, yeah… do you, like, want help?"

"Maybe," Cass said, setting the menu down and sighing. "I haven't eaten in a restaurant for twenty years."

Leah's eyes went wide, making her dilated pupils even more prominent. "Twenty years?! Oh my *stars*, I get sad if I don't get to go out with Mistress at least three times a week! Okay, okay, we're eating out every day for every meal, we gotta start making up for that!"

"It's fine," Cass said quickly, waving Leah off. "It's not… I'm just not used to… all this. Ordering food instead of eating what you're given or what you can scrounge. Being waited on." When the waitress, another woman in an absurdly frilly dress who was clearly also a floret, judging by how high she looked and the collar around her neck, had approached the two of them, Cass had nearly jumped out of her seat.

"Ohhhh," Leah said. "Yeaaah. I know what you mean, that reminds me of–" Her expression went blank, and she blinked a few times. "…huh? Oh, right! Do you need help picking something?"

"…maybe," she said, looking Leah over. It wasn't the first time her train of thought had just halted like that. Maybe it was a side effect of the drugs she was on. "What do you like here?"

"Uhmmm… well, I like the Cuddle Puddle, and I like the Class Z but I *have* to split that with someone, it's waaaaay too much for me, and, uhm…. oooh, the Arvense! I like that!" she said, scooching over until she was right next to Cass and pointing at the menu.

“Grilled ham and three kinds of cheese?” Cass read.

“’Cause he hams it up and his jokes are cheesy, get it?” Leah said, giggling. “He loves it, he thinks it’s hilarious.”

“That’s…strangely appropriate,” Cass said, a small smile cracking through her stoic demeanor. “I didn’t know you knew him.”

“He and Mistress are friends,” Leah explained. “He taught her all about my biochemistry, so she could dose me up for *maximum effect*.” She pumped her fists in an extremely adorable way for emphasis. “I was apparently a real mess before, but he and Mistress fixed me up good.”

Apparently? Another tally-mark in the Odd Things Leah Says category. Now that Cass knew the sorts of things Affini could do to a terran mind, she was starting to get concerned for the poor girl. “Isn’t this the sandwich you wanted to make?”

“Yeah! I had one last week and we haven’t been back since and so I wanted to try to make it. It’s *hard*. It’s so easy to burn it, and if you don’t put the cheese on right it all gloops out and *that* burns… cooking is a *lot* and I’m really glad my Mistress does it most of the time, even if it is kinda fun.”

“Well… maybe I can cook for you like you wanted,” Cass said. “Since it seems I’ll be sticking around a bit longer than I anticipated.”

“Really?” Leah said brightly. “That’s *great!* I knew you’d get to like it here!” She hugged Cass from the side, her head rubbing up against Cass’s arm and making every single hair on her body seem to stand on end. It was so, so much worse than the grocery, when she’d simply glommed on – the *hair* and the *rubbing* was nothing short of excruciating.

“Please don’t do that,” she grunted through clenched teeth.

“Do what?” Leah said, leaning into Cass.

“Don’t rub like that. Especially on my arms or shoulders, but just… *don’t*.” She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to think about anything but the sensation of hair on her exposed arm. *Why did I take the jacket off why did I take the jacket off why did I take the jacket off*.

“… huh? Oh no, I’m sorry.” She pouted and pulled away. “You don’t like hugs?”

“Just… fine touch, especially when it moves, is– it’s too much,” she said, trying to convince her shoulders to relax. “Hugs, I can handle, just not like that.”

“I’m sorry,” she repeated. “… is it okay if I do this?” Cass braced herself as Leah reached out with one hand, but all she did was slip a finger through one of Cass’s belt loops and hang onto it. Cass could feel the pressure and the warmth of her hand against her hip, but that was very tolerable, even nice when Leah was still.

“That’s… that’s fine,” Cass said, feeling a warmth in her cheeks she hadn’t known in some time. *When was the last time? It was before the Pillar of Fire, but after the Revolution….*

Tammy, from Wildheart Collective, wasn't it? But that was different. Tammy didn't have some kind of alien mind control parasite inside her. Leah wasn't in full control of herself, and was high almost all the time anyway. There were rules for this sort of thing, and for good reason.

But it *was* painfully cute, and for the whole time Leah hung onto her belt loop, even after ordering as they waited for their sandwiches to arrive, it was all Cass could do to think about that pressure and that warmth, and how much she'd denied herself for the past three years. Since she'd taken over at Bulwark, she'd largely only seen people who she had authority, however limited, over. There were no explicit rules set down in the Bulwark Collective Charter over fraternization – they weren't a formal military, after all – but again, there were underlying rules for that sort of thing, rules that Cass would never let herself break.

That train of thought ran in endless circles until the waitress – Denise, according to the flower-bordered name tag on her collar – returned with the sandwiches. "One Arvense and one Great Big Hug," she announced happily as she set them down in turn. "Anything else I can get for you two lovebirds?" Her eyes darted to Leah's hand, still hooked by a single finger onto Cass's belt loop.

"Huh? Oh, n-no," Cass said, "but thank you." She stared down at the grilled sandwich, the bread perfectly seared to a golden brown with just a hint of darker shades beginning to show through. She picked it up – still quite warm – and took an experimental bite.

The crunch of the bread between her teeth was *perfect*. The cheese was warm, creamy, but set *just* enough to hold the sandwich together. The ham, rich and meaty, added its own note to the complex interplay of the cheeses. It was one of the most delicious things Cass had tasted in years. There was the usual pang of guilt at eating pork, distant but not *quite* to the threshold of being ignorable. *Anyway*, she thought as she chewed and swallowed, *this almost certainly didn't come off a real pig.* Was vat-meat haram? Maybe, and it probably depended who you asked. Was Cass a particularly good Muslim anyway? Not really. "This is absolutely delicious," she said, her eyes still locked on the narrow reddish-pink layer of ham enclosed in the golden-white bounty of cheese and bread.

"Oooh, I'll be sure and tell the kitchen you liked it!" Denise said, clapping and bouncing excitedly on her feet. "I'll check in on you in a little bit, okay? Enjoy!" She skipped away, humming a tune. Cass had never seen anyone working in the service industry *skip* before.

"Is this… just what it's like?" Cass said, turning to look at Leah, who had bitten the end off of her wrap and was chewing away with a blissful look on her face. She mumbled something around a mouthful of food, then paused and just nodded enthusiastically, giggling for good measure.

"Mmmm, pretty much," she said after she'd swallowed.

"Just… this, every day?"

"Well, not *every* day," Leah said. "I wish we could come here every day. But then I'd never get to go anywhere else! Oooh, like Happy Dumpling! We should go there, too!"

“No, I mean–” Cass paused, still uncertain how to put it all into words. She took a bite of her sandwich and chewed on it as she thought, letting the taste and texture soothe her racing thoughts. “I know that I’m not expected to pay for this,” she said, holding up the sandwich. “That, even if I wanted to, there’s no money to do it with.”

Leah nodded and took another bite of her wrap. “It takes a while for some people to get used to it.”

“That’s not the issue, though,” Cass said. “This is good, it’s…it’s what I’ve spent my whole life fighting for, really. But it feels out of place, maybe even unfinished? I don’t know. I think that’s the best way to describe it – something undeniably good, but inextricably tied to something bad.”

“What’s bad? Leah said, frowning and setting her wrap down.”Is everything okay, Cassie?”

Cass looked down at Leah, hesitating for just a moment on her golden-brown irises and the deep pools of black they only just held in check. Then, she followed the waterfall of her wavy, absolutely immaculate hair down to the thin red collar around her neck. “Why did you choose this? Being a floret, I mean.”

“Why did I…? Well… I was–” She stopped, almost mid-breath, her eyes glazing over for just a heartbeat. “Huh? I’m sorry, what did you say?”

There it is again, Cass thought. *What’s causing that? It’s not random.* “Do you remember when they… I don’t know… floretted you? Is that even a word?”

Leah giggled. “Nooo, I don’t remember *that*. I was out for the surgery and *suuuuuuper* high for like a week after while the implant grew in.”

Well, that didn’t set it off. Cass took another bite of the sandwich and chewed – it was cooling off, the cheese a little more solid than before, a new texture that changed the sandwich without detracting from the experience. *God, whoever made this is a good chef*. “What’s it like, having that inside you? By comparison to normal, I mean.”

“The haustoric implant? Hmmm…” She put on a thoughtful face. “Well…it’s kiiiiinda like getting the warmest, best hug you’ve ever had, all the time, forever,” she finally said, sighing happily. “Like…I’ve got a little piece of Mistress right here.” She lifted a hand to the back of her neck, brushing aside her hair to trace the curve of her spine – and there it was, the scar, hair-fine but present. “She’s always with me, and I can always feel her love for me, and…” Tears began to well up in her eyes, and she fanned herself, a broad smile stretching across her face. “Stars, I love her,” she sniffled, wiping at her eyes.

Cass couldn’t help but feel a pang of sympathy for Leah. She could understand the need for certainty, the need for a love so all-encompassing it obliterated everything else. For Cass, that certainty was vested in her cause. Had Leah had something like that, before she’d been made into this? How much had her owner – and God, Cass hated how easy it had become to think that word – reached into her mind and changed her? She took a bite of her sandwich, then another. It was still delicious.

“And it’s useful, too,” Leah went on as Cass ate. “It lets her fine-tune all my dosages, the whole cocktail, Bs, Ds, Es, and Gs,” she sang cheerfully. “So I never ever run dry. That was a big part of fixing me, I know that.”

“What do you mean, fix?” She’d mentioned it before. But was this a question that would prompt another mental short-circuit?

“Well, I was *real* messed up before, Mistress said, but she took away all the bad so I don’t have to worry about it,” Leah replied, her voice so matter-of-fact it momentarily stunned Cass. *She knows her mind is being altered, and she’s just… okay with it?* She watched Leah take a big bite of her wrap. “Mmmmm.”

Cass marveled, as she watched Leah calmly eat her lunch, at how insidious the Affini could be. *It’s not only that they make struggle impossible, they root out the impulse to struggle at all*. Again, her heart ached for Leah. *Who would you be without the Affini telling you who to be, changing you to be who they want you to be, and making it so you can’t even question it?* That they’d made her into a sweet, kind, fun-loving woman, and very much Cass’s type to boot, was beside the point.

They’ll do this to me, if I’m not careful, she thought as she finished her sandwich. But how to fight back without provoking that very response? *To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill*. Their obsession with paperwork was a weakness she would exploit. She was no stranger to paperwork herself; twenty years of Archives work, of falsifying requisitions in her drunken and moribund superior’s name, of finding more and more ways to exploit his inattention and malaise, had given her almost a sixth sense for the stuff. *What else?*

The only other thing Cass could think of that rose to such a level of cultural fixation for the Affini were florets themselves. *They way they all reacted when Nell called them wormheads. They act without thinking when they perceive even the slightest threat to florets. But that’s a dangerous piece to play.* She put it aside; that was to be used only in the most dire of emergencies, and even then only in the subtlest of ways.

I need more information, she thought. *I need to learn more about how they treat terrans, how they treat each other, how they organize themse–*

“I said, did you want me to take your plate?”

Cass jumped – once again, Denise had snuck up on her, and her train of thought completely derailed. This was now a new situation, and she had to evaluate it with no warning. “S-sorry!” she stammered out. “Thinking!”

She laughed. “It’s okay, honey, I’m used to folks being spaced out. Though, usually there’s an Affini nearby responsible for that,” she added, winking at Leah, who let out a happy little giggle of her own.

“Right,” Cass said. “No, just thinking.” She stared down at her plate, empty of all but crumbs. It *had* been a delicious sandwich. She was almost sad that it was gone now. They’d made something so incredible, so beautiful, so *good* for her, and all she had done was eat the thing. “Listen, uhm…I know you don’t do money, and I think that’s great, but is there any

way I could–" She took her lower lip between her teeth and forced her thoughts back into alignment, into rhythm. "I don't feel like I'm contributing much to your collective, I mean, shipwide. I know I'm a visitor, but – I feel very odd being waited on."

"She hasn't eaten at a restaurant in *twenty years*," Leah said, nodding.

Denise's eyes went just as wide as Leah's had. "You're kidding. Why?"

Cass shrugged. "Solstice is a prison planet. Not exactly much in the way of luxuries."

"Oh *stars*," she said. Her expression shifted; now it was pity and concern. "Are you okay?"

Again, a shrug. "As okay as one can be, after a revolution and subsequent bombardment from orbit," Cass said.

"A revolution?" Denise raised an eyebrow and grinned. "Oh, I like this one, Leah," she added, reaching out to pat Cass on the shoulder.

"No touching!" Leah said, springing forward, her hand outstretched – which only carried her into Cass's shoulder, but at least she bounced back off fairly quickly once she realized it. "No touching the arms, she doesn't like it!"

"Ooop! Fair enough!" Denise said, pulling her hand back.

"Sorry," Cass mumbled. She reached out and picked up Leah's empty plate, stacking it on top of her own. She needed to do something with her hands to work out the people-are-looking-at-me feeling, the prickling warmth of shame at the back of her neck. *Why is it always worse when someone else does it for me?* "Can I, maybe, wash plates? Or something?" Anything to extract herself from the situation.

She shrugged. "I mean, if you want to help out in the kitchen, I don't see why you can't. What about you, cutie?" she said to Leah.

"Miss out on Cassie time?" Leah's finger found its way back into Cass's belt loop. "No way! Bathtime for plates!"

"Well, that settles it," Denise said. "Come on, follow me."

Chapter End Notes

If the ending feels a bit sudden, that's because hey, guess what? When I was writing this chapter it got to over 8000 words and I *still wasn't done* and y'all? That's too much chapter. That's an absurd amount of text. That's almost ten percent of a whole novel.

On the upside there should be another chapter in relatively short order, especially if it just keeps falling out of my head and onto the page like it has been the last week or so.

Tune in next time for some more quality time with Cass and Tsuga, and also *a single very chaste smooch* oh my stars gettin' to that *lewd stuff* y'all.

Thank you so much for reading!

Chapter 9: Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

In which two hugs take place.
Content warning: discussion of sophont extinction

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cass had seen working kitchens before, both on Earth and on Solstice, where she'd sometimes covered for a fellow prisoner too sick or injured to stand up for eight hours – after all, it wasn't like her dead-end drunkard of a supervisor would notice. It was a shock if the disinherited scion of one of Osborne-Clark's leading families left his quarters more than twice a week, and consequently no one expected anything short of an abysmal response time from Archives, which wasn't exactly a high-priority division to begin with.

Working kitchens, Cass knew, were inevitably cramped, hot, poorly ventilated, loud, and injury-prone. They were among some of the most miserable places one could work, and relied more on churn than on employee loyalty – and that was on Earth, where one had the option (however theoretical) to quit. She was sure that this kitchen would be no different, but she'd been consuming resources since she got here and had done nothing to give back to the collective, and even if it was an alien collective full of trapped and brainwashed terrans, it was still a collective, and said trapped terrans deserved reciprocity if nothing else.

There was also, of course, the chance to gain intelligence – if Leah was anything to judge by, florets would blab whatever came into their heads regardless of what it meant for operational security. She might be able to learn something useful just by washing dishes and keeping an open ear, so she braced herself and took that last step into the kitchen.

It was not cramped, nor was it hot, and the windows lining the wall let in both light and fresh air. The same music playing front-of-house was playing back here, too. It was less like a working kitchen and more like the sort of thing one saw in photos of quadrillionaires' estates, open and lavish in a way that screamed *I'm just for show*, but there were half a dozen people working with room to spare, smiles on everyone's faces, engaging in friendly conversation as they put together sandwich after sandwich.

I really need to stop expecting past experience to inform anything on this ship, Cass thought, staring at the scene so lost in thought she didn't even notice the man with the ruddy beard walking up until he said, "Hey there! Couple of looky-loos curious how the magic happens?"

"She wants to wash dishes," Denise said, snickering just a little as she picked up another set of plates. "Still used to money, I guess," she added as she backed out the door and vanished around the corner.

"Oh, yeah, that can take a while to wear off," he said, holding out a hand. "Cliff Catalpa, First Floret."

"Cass Hope," she said, hesitantly taking the man's hand. He had a firm but not tight grip, and callused fingers. He was maybe about her age – tough to tell, with the beard.

"Now don't you worry about nothin', alright?" he went on. "You and me, we're square. There's plenty for everyone here, so no more workin' for your daily bread. The Affini make sure of that."

"No, that much I understand," Cass said. "That's sort of the point, really. I feel like I'm taking from the collective without contributing. It feels…weird, I guess, is the best word for it."

"Cass likes to help," Leah said, leaning into her, careful to keep her hair away from Cass's skin this time. The pressure and the warmth weren't unpleasant. "She's a helper."

"Aaah, I see," Cliff said, nodding. "Well, if you want to wash dishes, you certainly can." He gestured at an absolutely pristine sink. "I used to, back before I learned how to stop worrying about ideas like 'waste.' We mostly just decompile the dirty plates now, it's quicker. Sometimes, I still wash 'em though, especially if Master comes around. He thinks it's cute, see?" His cheeks warmed fractionally to match his beard.

"But doesn't taking something apart on the molecular level like that require an absurd amount of energy?"

"See, there's that 'worrying about waste' thing I was talking about," Cliff responded, chuckling.

"Fine," Cass said, smiling awkwardly even though she didn't really see what was so funny. "If not washing plates, then–?"

"Wanna learn how to make a really damn good sandwich?" he said, shrugging.

"Yeah!" Leah shouted, raising a hand. "I do!"

"Well, you, my dear," he said, leaning in close and pausing. "Ohhh yeah, you're *real* high."

"Am not," she said, sticking out her tongue. "Just a little buzzed."

"Buzzed for you, maybe," Cliff said, straightening up, "but high enough I don't want you doin' nothin' dangerous. You wash your hands and go on over and talk to Millie and Jen and

they'll get you started on assembly. *You*," he added, turning to Cass, "you look like you've got some decent upper body strength. Ever work a deli slicer?"

"No, but I'm a quick study," Cass said. What followed was a crash course in food and appliance safety, culminating in Cass turning out paper-thin slices of cold cuts and cheeses. It was oddly satisfying, moving things across the spinning blades in a smooth, rhythmic motion. Cliff worked beside her, first guiding her through the motions, then observing her, and finally leaving her to her own devices as he attended to other kitchen tasks once he was satisfied she understood what she was doing.

It gave her time to think, and to listen. There was kitchen chatter, of course – orders coming up, timing, preparation details, and so on – but for the most part, the conversation was more like a bunch of friends simply hanging out. Leah got on famously with Millie and Jen, the three of them only taking a break from talking about their respective (ugh) owners when Leah needed guidance. Cliff and Sascha, a leaner dark-haired man whose personal grooming read *twink* to Cass, tended to talk shop more, including about some of the meats Cass was working with.

"Wait, you cured this yourself?" Cass said, shaving a piece off of something called *capocollo*. "It didn't come out of a compiler?"

"Well, the original meat, sure," Cliff said, "but everything after that, one-hundred-percent traditional air-curing. Sascha knows a guy who got into culinary history and preservation after he got domesticated, and he's got a whole butcher shop full of cuts of meat that damn near vanished because no one with a net worth south of a billion could afford 'em on the regular. Fewer people eatin' somethin' means less of a market means less people makin' it which means less people *learnin'* to make it which means it gets *more* expensive, lather, rinse, repeat. Ain't capitalism grand?"

"Mmmm." Cass nodded. "So what you're saying is that six months ago, I could have bought a starship with this chunk of meat in my hand," she added, smiling – this time, for real.

"Oh, at least!" He laughed, then reached out and stole a slice from beneath the deli slicer and popped it into his mouth. "Mmmm. Tastes like five years' wages!"

"It is nice to be around real food again," Cass said. "Half the time, all we had were those awful ration bricks."

"Oh, you had the bricks? See, they gave us the *cubes* on my ship. We used to call it single-serving-shit. Where'd you serve?"

"Solstice." She steeled herself and met Cliff's eyes – there it was, the spark of recognition, the *oh-shit*. "Don't worry. I was in for ideological reasons. Most of us were."

"Well…dang. Glad you're out, at least."

"It's not as bad as it used to be, in some ways," she said. "We had a revolution when the war started, threw out the suits."

“I heard about the uprising, yeah,” Cliff said. “The news said they suppressed it, though.”

“Well, they said a lot of things, didn’t they?” Cass replied. “They certainly tried, and– well, they tried.” *I don’t want to talk about it. I need to stay focused on them, anyway*.

“Well, true. The official news was sure full of it. They were pumping us full of nonsense non-stop after I got drafted. All sorts of things, like, ‘the Affini eat terrans alive,’ ‘the Affini will make *you* eat terrans alive,” ’they’ll send your family to the mines and work ’em to death.’” He shook his head and laughed. “Wound me right up so’s I didn’t know which way I was goin’, then pointed me at the Compact and said ‘go and kill for your species.’ So, when they inevitably got on my ship, you know what I did? I pulled the pin on a grenade and charged ’em!”

“…you’re kidding.”

“Oh, he’s not kidding,” Sascha said, grinning. “He loves this story.”

“Well, it was was later in the war, so we knew which way this thing was swingin’, you know? I figured, hell, I’m in the front line, I’m dead anyway – I might as well try and save my squaddies, right? So off I go, frag in hand tickin’ away, and one of ’em grabs me, picks me right up off the ground and yanks the thing out of my hand, and he stuffs it *inside himself* so when it goes off I don’t get hurt.” He laughed and spread his arms wide. “And that’s how I met my Master!”

Sascha snickered. “Every time, he has to make it *so* dramatic.”

“He had a grenade go off inside him and he was…okay?” Cass could scarcely believe it – she’d seen what grenades could do to people during the Revolution. Even the overpressure was enough to kill, even if the shrapnel wasn’t.

“Oh, yeah. He said it stung a little,” Cliff said, going back to slicing paper-thin cuts of onion. “They’re tough as nails, you know? He didn’t even have to rebloom– that’s when they sort of heal up and regrow themselves,” he added.

“I’ve been told about that, yes.” She still found it hard to believe that anything could live through having a grenade go off *inside* it. Surely the Affini had to have vital organs of some kind, didn’t they? “And after you tried to kill him, what, they just let you go?”

Cliff snorted. “Are you kidding? Charging an Affini with a live grenade in hand? One-way trip to domestication city.”

This doesn’t make sense, Cass thought. *He introduced himself as a floret, but he seems completely normal. Probably more normal than I am*. “So…he made you his pet?”

“Oh, he couldn’t resist! And neither could I, once he loaded me up with enough Class Js to knock out a horse,” he said, laughing. “Once he got me calmed down and explained how things work here, it was easy street.”

“Because you don’t *seem* like the florets I’ve met.”

“Yeah, because you’re hanging out with Miss Space Cadet 2555 over there,” Sascha said, nodding across the kitchen at Leah.

“It ain’t all xenodrugs and snuggles,” Cliff said, winking at Cass. “Though I do like those. But being blasted outta my mind doesn’t go with cooking, so here I am, stone cold sober and loving every minute of it. I did kitchen work for wages before I got drafted, sure, ‘cause it was the only thing I loved enough I could stand to keep grindin’ at. Now I get paid in smiles, and I like that a lot better.”

Cass was quiet for a moment, nodding as she processed what she’d been told. The deli slicer hummed as she shaved down the capocollo. *They seem fully lucid*, she thought. *I’m missing something here. What makes them so blasé about being treated like this?* Was it the kitchen? The sheer material comfort available? Was there a library somewhere on this that would dwarf even the Archives, and which would hook Cass the way Cliff and Sascha seemed to be hooked? *That could never be enough*, Cass thought. *Not even that. What am I missing?*

Leah insisted on walking Cass home. There was absolutely no arguing with her, though Cass certainly tried, and it occupied them for the entire walk. “You gotta treat a lady like a lady,” she insisted, hanging on Cass’s belt loop as the rounded the last corner. “And you’re a heck of a lady!”

“If you say so,” Cass said, but she couldn’t help but smile a little.

“It’s the rules! …I don’t remember where I learned it,” she said, frowning a bit. “But it’s a rule, I know that.”

“Well, that’s Tsuga’s hab right there,” Cass said, pointing, “so you’ve done your chivalric duty. Are you going to be okay to get back on your own?”

“Heyyy, I’m the one being chi-val-ric here! Mmm, good word,” she added, giggling and biting her lip. “But no, I’m fine, I’m like, *so* sober right now. And your leg is still all junked up, isn’t it? You should go in and sit.”

“It’s fine, honestly,” Cass said. She’d gotten so used to the weird, mossy leg brace that, for much of the time, she forgot it was even there. Her leg hadn’t hurt at all in days. In fact, nothing had, really – the situation aside, Cass felt better than she had in a long time, since well before her hormone precursors had run out. *That alien HRT must really work*, she thought.

“Stars, you’ve got such a hot smile,” Leah said, standing on her tiptoes and planting a kiss right on Cass’s lips. Cass was too stunned to stop her. “Mmmyeah, definitely want more of those,” she said, laughing. Then, she paused, looked a bit concerned. “Oh, kisses don’t bother you, do they?”

“N-no,” Cass said. “Just wasn’t expecting it.”

“And hugs?” She bit her lip.

“One hug,” and before the words were even fully out of her mouth Leah’s arms were wrapped around Cass’s midsection, squeezing tightly. It was a surprisingly comfortable pressure, and Cass even found herself enjoying it after a moment of getting used to it. Leah was warm and soft, and she smelled like a flower garden in full bloom. It felt natural, right, when Cass put her arms around Leah’s shoulders. They fit together well, and they stayed in the hug together for a long minute.

“I don’t wanna let go,” Leah mumbled into Cass’s chest.

’I bet you don’t,” Cass said. Leah’s face was mashed right up against Cass’s breasts, which, while not necessarily all she’d have wanted out of her second puberty, and which age had long since started catching up to, were certainly not negligible.

“More dates.” It was not a question, but a demand.

“We’ll talk about it,” Cass said. *Am I dating a floret?* she thought. *Because she certainly seems to think I am. Can you date someone who isn’t even themselves? Am I dating her, or the version of her that the Affini made her be?*

“More dates,” Leah repeated, squeezing even tighter.

“If nothing else,” Cass said, “I definitely want to try more of those sandwiches from Cliff’s. And the dumpling place you mentioned. So, we’ll talk. About where to go next.” *There. That’s noncommittal, but it should be enough*, she thought.

“Okay…” Leah pouted and released Cass. “I mean it!”

“I know you do,” Cass said gently. “And I’m sure I’m going to get about ten or twenty messages from you when you get back home.”

“At *least*,” she said, giggling and bouncing a little bit in place. “Okay! Bye Cassie!” She turned and skipped off down the path, paused, turned and waved, skipped a little further, paused to wave again, and finally skipped round the corner before doubling back and waving a final time. Cass waved back each time.

What the hell are you doing? she asked herself. *She’s got a mind-control parasite made out of alien plant people in the back of her neck.* And yet, Leah didn’t seem like a sock-puppet, dancing on invisible strings. The florets of the cafe’s kitchen had all, more or less, been fully lucid (which was probably a good thing considering they were using knives, deli slicers, and a hot griddle-top stove). She’d spoken to them all in turn, and they’d all been open about how and why they’d been domesticated, and how much better off they were now.

And every single one of them wore a collar. Every single one of them was owned by a xeno, a pet instead of a person. Somehow, they were happy with it, in a way that didn’t feel forced. Cass couldn’t understand it. Maybe the Affini were just that good at what they did – maybe all the florets were just biological robots following inhumanly complex programming that she couldn’t spot the seams of. *But why make a robot that just wants to get high, hug people, and eat sandwiches?*

She shook her head and sighed. There was no logic to any of it. Not human logic, anyway; maybe it made sense to whatever went on in the heads of the Affini. She wasn't going to figure it out right this second, standing out on the path, looking up at the sunline and the far side of the ring beyond.

When the door to Tsuga's hab slid open and Cass walked in, she found the enormous two-thousand-year-old alien plant in the middle of redecorating – or, at least, in the middle of moving some of the boxes that had been in the room Cass was sleeping in. The moment she laid eyes on Cass, though, she stopped short. "You're back! Are you feeling better?"

"Uh…yeah," Cass said, extracting her hands from the pockets of her jacket and shrugging it off. "I just spent some time with someone I met at the grocery a couple days ago. We got lunch. Then we helped out in the kitchen."

"Did that help?"

"Yeah, I think so. Sorry about before," Cass said after a moment of thought. "It was just a lot to process."

"But you're more comfortable about the difference in our ages now?" She set the boxes down and crossed to Cass with three long steps, squatting down in front of her. Cass still had to look up at her.

"I don't know if comfortable is the word for realizing I've been bunking with someone who's older than my religion," Cass said, "but I can deal with it." When she'd first left Tsuga's hab, earlier that day, she'd been obsessively making a list of things Tsuga was older than – ignoring relativistic shifts between Solstice, Earth, Messier 32, and wherever else Tsuga had spent her absurdly long life, of course. Strange matter spatial torsion, obviously, so obvious it almost wasn't worth counting. Electronic computers. Vaccination. The Hall-Héroult process. Movable type. The stirrup. Buttons. Eyeglasses. Rockets. Fireworks. Windmills. Banknotes. Universities. Chess. The Fall of Rome.

"I'm sorry. It must be a lot to absorb all at once," Tsuga said softly. "I hope it helps you understand why we do what we do, though. You must understand there is no malice whatsoever in our actions. We only want to help you, and we have a great deal of experience in helping."

"I can understand that," Cass said, nodding. "Can you understand that we – me and my people down on Solstice – may not want or need your help?"

"Cass, I saw the way you were living. You need our help. Individually, yes, many terrans are entirely capable of managing their own lives, but on the whole you need us." There was something in the way she said it, Cass thought, that hinted at something deeper. It was subtle, but then, Tsuga *was* an alien. Cass had enough trouble understanding other humans, so really, it was a miracle she could glean anything from Tsuga at all. Still, she couldn't help but feel a sadness lingering behind her words when she spoke of conditions at Bulwark.

"We endure hardship for the sake of something better," Cass replied. "How is that any different from what you do? You expend so much energy, so much effort – and I know it's

probably not as colossal to you as it seems to us, but nevertheless – you do all you do, in your eyes, to make the world a better place. Why can't you connect what you do to what we do? Why can't you accept that, if individual terrans can manage their own affairs, so can terran subcultures?"

Tsuga was silent for a long moment, and Cass had to fight the urge to look her in the face, for fear of meeting her eyes. Finally, she spoke: "You make an interesting argument," she admitted. "You are a very interesting terran, Cass Hope, and I feel very fortunate to be able to know you."

"Yeah, well…" Cass felt her face warm, felt and indulged in the urge to awkwardly scratch at the back of her head. *Why do I feel this way? I haven't looked at her eyes. Is she hypnotizing me in some other way? Or is this just residual emotion from Leah?* "You're not so bad yourself," she muttered. "But, you see my point, right?"

"I do," Tsuga said. "But I don't think it will win over many Affini. I'm not sure it even wins me over, to be perfectly honest. We have a long history of doing this, Cass. You can appreciate just how long when I say that, from my perspective, our collective task has been going on long enough that I feel about it the way that I think you likely feel about me. It is ancient in a way difficult for me to grasp, with momentum and weight behind it that, I think, is impossible to deflect. I can see that it is good, but it is something so much greater than me that I cannot help but feel awe at it – at least, for now. Perhaps in a dozen Blooms, I'll feel differently about it. We know and we have seen *so much*…and we have seen what happens when things go wrong. *I've* seen what happens when things go wrong."

"And that's enough for you to dismiss out of hand the idea that we could take care of ourselves?" Cass said, keeping her voice calm even as the rest of her clenched tight. *They've been doing this so long that someone who's been around for two thousand years thinks it's incomprehensibly ancient?*

Tsuga was silent again, looking away as her vines shuffled inside her bark. *Anxiety?* Cass didn't think Affini *could* be anxious, but that's what it felt like to her. After a particularly energetic shiver, Tsuga stood up. "It's not something I like to talk about," she said, "but you deserve an explanation. Before I was an ecological engineer, I worked as an archaeologist."

"You mentioned archaeology a couple of times," Cass said, nodding. "But you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"I know terrans have a self-study discipline of archaeology," Tsuga went on. "Most archaeology for us, however, is xenoarchaeology. Some of us study the pasts of sophonts we encounter, often in tandem with them, to help us better understand them and to help them better understand themselves. Others, formerly including myself, study sophonts that–" Her voice caught, and Cass could see her bark shift as if her whole body were convulsing. "That we weren't in time to save."

Cass felt a cold shiver run down her back, a prickling feeling climbing her scalp. "What do you mean?" she said. "I thought you were impossibly advanced. I mean, look at everything you've done! You travel between *galaxies.*"

“We are not gods, Cass,” Tsuga said, not looking at her. “We *are* able to travel faster than light, and more effectively than terrans are, and our technology outstrips yours often by orders of magnitude, so I understand your misconception. Why don’t we simply expand as quickly as, mathematically, we should be able to? Because domestication requires time and resources. We are limited by things like available mass, number of Affini, and other factors – and space is, as I’m sure you’re aware, a very big place. So, from time to time we encounter sophont species who, sadly, are no longer extant. We know them only through what they leave behind.”

Click, went the thought in Cass’s head. She understood the overprotectiveness now, the inability to believe that terrans could govern their own affairs. She’d read enough history, enough works from hundreds of years in the past, to know how many terrans were sure that extinction was coming in their lifetime. She knew, if only intellectually, the dread. “You’ve seen worlds where the people there killed themselves,” she said quietly.

“Occasionally,” Tsuga said, nodding. “More often, it’s through no fault of their own; supervolcanic eruptions, asteroid or cometary encounters, geomagnetic shifts, solar extinction. There are many ways for a species to die.” That convulsion came back again, stronger this time – some of her needles had dropped off, and Cass felt a sick worry that she might start losing some of her bark carapace as well. “But yes, I have seen species who drove themselves to extinction. Nuclear exchanges. Biological warfare.” She paused for a heartbeat. “Relativistic kinetic strikes. Hypermetric bombs. Other things, worse things, that I’m not sure your language has words for. If it does, I don’t know them, I’m sorry.”

It hurts her to think about this, Cass thought, and a deep draught of pity welled up inside her, tightening around her heart. “You don’t have to talk about it anymore,” she said, crossing over to Tsuga and putting a hand on her thigh. *This might help a human calm down. Maybe it’ll help her*. “I understand why you feel the way you do. And…thank you for telling me.”

Another shudder ran through Tsuga’s body, and Cass could feel every vibration. Still, it seemed to help. “Thank you for listening,” Tsuga said. “I…don’t speak of it often.”

“Sounds like you burned out,” Cass said. “And I think anyone would, if it’s as bad as all that.”

“It has its rewards, sometimes,” Tsuga said. Something about her voice brightened, but the sadness didn’t go away. “Like when we’re able to find sufficient remains that we can synthesize a hereditary molecule and associated proteins. Then, with a little work, we can bring them back. Even if we couldn’t be there for their ancestors, we can at least be there for the new generation.”

Cass tried not to let her disquiet show. *They resurrect species from extinction? Why in the world would they do that? If they’re dead, they’re not suffering.* “I think I get how you feel,” she said, putting aside her confusion. “I understand why you don’t want to leave us alone. But knowing that doesn’t change how I feel, or how my people down on Solstice feel. Do you get that?”

“I do,” Tsuga said, nodding and, fractionally, relaxing. One of her vines gently coiled around Cass’s wrist, and she fought down the revulsion and the impulse to jerk it away. “I think we

may be, unfortunately, diametrically opposed in our opinions."

"Well…I'm glad we at least understand one another," Cass said, letting out a sigh. Once the vine was still, it was much more tolerable – a pressure, not a *sliding* feeling full of texture and sensation. "I'm not going to stop resisting. I can't. I owe it to my people to do what I can for them, to keep as many of them independent, and to keep us as a whole as independent as I can."

"I understand. But be careful. We Affini are not well-disposed to toleration of feralism, and this ship in particular has a great deal of experience with direct domestication of feralists. If you are too forceful, or if you say the wrong thing, you'll find yourself going down that path as well, and there will be nothing I can do to stop it."

"I've got you in my corner," Cass said, taking a chance at looking up at Tsuga to give her a smile – that was safe enough, at this angle, for just a moment. "So how can I go wrong?" She was under no illusions that Tsuga was probably going to undermine her own efforts, but if nothing else she was an invaluable source on how the Affini operated, how they thought, what they wanted and why.

Tsuga's needles shifted as she looked down at Cass, and another vibration ran through her plant-like body, falling into a strange kind of rhythm. There was a brief moment when their gaze met, before Tsuga's leaflike eyelids slid in to block most of her eyes. It was a subtler effect than it had been before. "I know I've just said this, Cass," she said, "but it bears repeating: I'm very happy that I get to know you."

"You changed your face," Cass said. It was obvious, now that she was looking at it – so much more natural looking, so much less mask-like.

"I did. My face before was just a unskilled effort at copying Polyphylla's. I've had time to observe how your face moves so… I made another effort. And I think it came out well."

"I think so too," Cass said, grinning. "Much more femme." *Do not*, she told herself, *get turned on by the weird alien plant lady*. Which, itself, reminded her of something. "Hey, unrelated, but did you ever sort out the pronoun thing?"

"What?" Cass felt the rhythm inside Tsuga stutter slightly. *Did I surprise her?* she thought. "Oh, no, no I still haven't worked your schema out. The books never made any sense to me, and even with terrans around on this ship – well, you have variations and gradations, yes? But the literature also says terrans insist they're all separate and very strictly so, and I can never keep which is which properly aligned. Like, you, for example, I know your pronouns because I've heard others use them, but just to look at you… well, I know you're a woman, but you dress in a fashion the books associate with masculinity, and you – all of your comrades, really – lack the facial markings associated with femininity in the texts. You can see how this quickly winds up going around in circles, yes?"

Cass nodded. If nothing else, Tsuga seemed *much* more enthusiastic for talking about gender than she did for talking about heavier subjects. She felt bad for blundering into messy territory, so if this helped Tsuga move on and stop stressing out, she was happy to play along.

“I mean, for one thing, we’re at war. Were at war, I don’t know,” she added, shrugging, “but also you’re probably being thrown off by the fact that I’m a huge dyke.”

“… a structure that prevents water from flooding low-lying areas?”

Cass snorted. “No, no, it’s slang,” she said. “It means lesbian.”

“Lesbian is…” Before Cass could answer, Tsuga’s eyes flew open. “Ah! I remember. A lesbian is a woman who prefers the company of other women for romantic pursuits!”

“Close enough.” Tsuga was having issues grasping the basics, and Cass was not about to drag her into the deeper waters of age-old discourse.

“And this has what to do with gender roles?”

“Oh, nothing and everything,” Cass said, laughing. *God, I wish we could just* talk *like this without having to worry about everything else going on.* “You sure go right for the hard questions.”

Tsuga looked surprised – with her new face, Cass was having an even easier time reading her expression. “Humans find the subject difficult as well?”

“I know that 44 years probably doesn’t sound like a lot to you, but that’s how long, bar when I was really, really young, that I’ve been thinking about it just as it concerns me, and I *still* learn new things about how I relate to my body, my sense of self, and how I feel about other peoples’ bodies all the time.” She gave Tsuga’s leg a gentle pat. “You’ve been at it, what, a couple months? I’m not surprised it weirds you out. I’m more shocked other Affini get it at all, frankly.”

“We are very adaptable,” Tsuga said. “We have ensured that. It’s necessary for what we do.”

“Well, what Affini gender are you? Actually, do you even have gender?” Cass had been wondering this for some time, especially after meeting the Captain.

“Not in any way that maps particularly well to your species, unfortunately,” Tsuga said. “The Captain suggested I simply find a pronoun I like the sound of and use that, and e does have quite a bit of experience with terrans specifically.”

“Well, experimentation works,” she said, nodding. “If something doesn’t feel right, it probably isn’t.”

“I feel as if there’s simply too much to choose one as a starting point. I have done it before, of course, but…” *There’s that sadness again*, Cass thought. *Is she still feeling off about the archaeology stuff?* “Well, in that instance, the lines were much clearer,” Tsuga finally said. “While it’s far from universal, eusocial species tend to have a strong identification between gender and role in the collective.”

“And one of those really clicked with you?” Cass tried to imagine it – had it been like the moment, now etched in her memory, when Little Cass had wondered why she had to go with Papa instead of Mama at the mosque?

“One did. It was… I think the best translation would be egg-guardian? A role for carrying and nourishing the eggs laid by the queen. They had rather more reproductive roles than terrans do, obviously,” Tsuga said. Her needles were drooping again – now *this* conversation was making Tsuga upset, and Cass’s stomach tied itself in knots as she tried to puzzle out the connection.

“Okay,” she said, to fill the air and to give herself time to think. *This had to have happened after she quit archaeology, if she met a living species, so why is this bothering her so much?*

“Unfortunately, I don’t think you can pronounce–” A horrible rasping, clicking, rattling sound, like a thousand crickets made of chainsaws, sounded forth from somewhere inside Tsuga. Cass could feel it through her hand, still anchored firmly to Tsuga’s thigh, and it felt like nails scraping down a chalkboard.

“No,” Cass said, shaking her head and trying to force her heart to slow back down. *What kind of mouthparts make a sound like that?!* “No, definitely not.”

“So you see the problem,” Tsuga said, making a very pronounced sigh.

I have to get her out of this spiral, Cass thought. *I’m the asshole that put her there.* “Well, for what it’s worth, I’ve always read you as a woman, and egg-guardian…” She shrugged. “Yeah, that fits, I guess, if you want to go for biological determinism.” *We don’t need to complicate things by bringing up seahorses*. “Does that help at all?”

Tsuga’s bark carapace shifted. “Perhaps. As you said, experimentation works, and in light of the Captain’s advice…yes, perhaps I will try that. Tsuga Sequi, 8th Bloom, she/her. Hmm. Tsuga Sequi, 8th Bloom, she/they?” She made a soft, disgruntled noise. “This is still very complicated.”

“You’re telling me,” Cass said, smiling. “I’ve had to live with this all my life.”

“You appear to have mastered it,” Tsuga said, finally giving Cass an odd, wooden smile in return. “So perhaps there is hope for me yet. Thank you for your help. May I…I know you are a very independent terran, and that you don’t care much for affectionate gestures, but may I hug you?”

Cass froze. The vine around her wrist tightened fractionally, the barest hint of movement but enough to set her hair on end. *Why does she want to hug me?* she thought, followed immediately by *Because Affini are all hyperaffectionate, you’ve seen this*, followed up by *At least she asked instead of just doing it*, and finally ending in *You dug up uncomfortable memories, you owe her a little bit of affection, and maybe it’ll help her feel better*. “S-sure,” she said.

She was unprepared for how swiftly Tsuga moved. Before Cass could realize what was happening, she was kneeling down again, wrapping her long arms tightly around Cass and lifting her clear off the ground. Vines wrapped around her as Tsuga stood, cuddling Cass close to her chest – she’d expected the bark to be rough, but there was enough moss and other foliage interwoven with it that, despite the complex texture, it was surprisingly comfortable. One of Tsuga’s huge hands supported her legs (and, if she didn’t know better, she’d think the

alien plant was copping a feel), and the urge to cling to the Affini for dear life subsided as Cass realized how stable and how firm Tsuga's grip on her was.

Cass relaxed slowly, leaning into Tsuga. She somehow knew with a powerful certainty that Tsuga would never let her fall. She radiated safety and comfort, a soft thrumming like a cat's purr rumbling up from deep inside her. She was warm, too, warmer than Cass would have thought a walking tree could ever be. Tears began to gather in the corners of Cass's eyes, and she had no idea why – she rubbed them away and calmed the ache in her chest with slow, deep breaths.

This doesn't mean anything, she told herself. *This is just a favor you're doing for a friend.* Was Tsuga a friend? She didn't seem like an enemy, and in enemy territory, maybe that was enough. *You don't belong here, and you're going to go home, and you're going to get back to work building a better world.*

Everyone is counting on you, Cass Hope. It was the classic refrain in the back of her thoughts, taking center stage once again. *Don't let them down*.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, *there*. Ooof, that kitchen scene was way more work than I thought it would be.

Thank you all for reading — it is no joke that y'all's responses are the most validation I've ever gotten for my writing, and I really appreciate it.

Chapter 10: Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

> For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

> In which a handful of terrans are very bad and in which one terran is very good, at least by Affini standards.
> Content Warnings: A new perspective character with extremely bad politics and beliefs he has never bothered to examine, and who has marinated uncritically in Accord propaganda his entire life. Seriously, don't be like Nikolai, folks.
>
> The good news is that, after Nikolai, we get another, much nicer, new perspective character, who is having a much better time with her life.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

More weeds were landing. It creeped Nikolai out every time he saw one of the gigantic shuttles descending noiselessly out of the sky – it felt like the things should just *drop* and flatten everything. Maybe there was some way to do that, to interfere with whatever xeno tech let them do that. That's how it worked in the movies, anyway, and yeah, those were *movies*, but still, it was an idea.

Stars-dammit, I wish we could just fight these fucking things, he thought as he ducked back into the bunker. *Instead of these coward-ass communist run-away-and-hide tactics*. He had to admit, the coward-ass communist run-away-and-hide tactics had worked for the communists when they'd overthrown Osborne-Clark, but that was different – the Terran Cosmic Navy had abandoned them to go fight the weeds, and they mostly only had crowd-control tools and small arms, not the kind of weapons you needed to put down a mass uprising.

The main room looked empty – but that was mostly down to the weeds having come in and scrubbed the place clean. It had been annoying and demeaning, but it had paid off. The cleaner room looked so bare it was easier to hide that they were stripping anything useful and loading it up in the getaway tunnel below. Several runs had already gone out under cover of night to start distribution of emergency supplies via dead-drops. No one was sure what kind of orbital infrastructure the weeds had set up, but the going assumption was Too Much, so everyone proceded under maximum paranoia. Now that there was an evacuation order, there was time for one more big load, and it had to cover everyone who hadn't already left. Some

would go out on foot; others would ride along with the supplies. There was an old puddle-jumper stashed a kilometer or so away, but no one was willing to risk using something that visible, not against the weeds.

Nell was in the radio room, which was pretty much a glorified closet with an old terminal wired to a digital audio recorder. “Good, you’re here,” she said, glancing up from a little spacer’s notebook she was flipping through. “How are we looking up top?”

“Getting dark, and the big bastard is right on schedule,” Nikolai said, flashing a thumbs-up at her. “They ought to be good and distracted for the next bit.”

“Well…no time like the present, then.” She tapped a few commands into the terminal, then held up the mic, reading from the notebook. “This is Bulwark calling all stations. Bulwark calling all stations. *Tools down*, I repeat, *tools down*.” She paused, squinting. “Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote,” she went on, rolling her eyes. “One, one, three, five, one, seven, seven, six. Four, four, three, five, nine. Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows. One, three, eight, nine, one. Eight, six, five, five, zero. It does no harm to the romance of the sunset to know a little about it. Six, one, four, two, zero. Seven, one, six, five, five, one.” She went on, reading out weird proverbs followed by a series of numbers, for almost a minute before she turned off the recorder. “Fucking Cass,” she muttered. “Has to make everything a stars-damned lecture about literature or something.”

“Mmmm. That explains all the weird frou-frou bullshit,” Nikolai said, nodding. *Honestly shocked it wasn’t even more impenetrable if she wrote it*, he thought.

“Well, if it confuses us, it’ll confuse the plants even more.” She tore the page from the spacer’s notebook, the flimsy half-transparent paper giving way easily, and tucked it into her mouth. She chewed for a moment before spitting a wad of slimy pulp out, and gave it a good grind under her heel for good measure, smearing it across the floor. “Let’s see them reconstruct that – and even if they can, it won’t do them much good to have half of a one-time pad.” She tapped in a few more commands on the terminal, then turned to face Nikolai. “Alright, the timer’s set. Let’s get out of here before the broadcast starts and the plants come to ask questions.”

“Don’t gotta tell me twice,” Nikolai muttered. “The sooner we get away from those creepy things, the better.” He followed her down the maintenance access passage, a cement shaft that echoed with the metallic twang of boots on steps, to the musty old garage and tunnel that led to the mountain road. The garage was already full of people, some working on loading, others guarding a confused-looking bunch. *Plantfuckers*. Nikolai felt his stomach clench.

“Hey, Nell, what’s going on?” one of them called out as they entered. “How come everyone’s armed?”

“Yeah,” another said, “and why are we having a meeting in the garage?”

“Because we’re leaving,” Nell said. “So shut up and get in the truck.” There was an uncomfortable silence, and a few exchanged glaces. “Don’t make me tell you again. Get in the fucking truck.”

“But the Affini are–”

“Shut up and get in the fucking truck!” Nell shouted. “This is a military situation, you are receiving military orders, *get in the truck*. I’m not leaving anyone behind to spill their guts to the weeds after they shove–” Her voice caught, and she squeezed her eyes shut. “I don’t want to hear any arguing, I don’t want to hear anyone bitching, I don’t want to hear any but-I wanna-stays,” she finally went on, finishing in a mocking tone. “I’m not leaving any of you behind,” she repeated, “so you will either get in that truck, or you will be *put* in the truck!”

After another short silence, the plantfuckers got moving. They were hesitant at first, but there were few at Bulwark, and none among the plantfuckers, who could stand up to the sheer weight of Nell’s glare. Their compliance gave Nikolai a chance to ponder at what Nell had just said. *What did she mean by but-I-wanna-stay? I mean, sure, one of them probably would have brought that up, but I know that tone. She’s mad at someone.*

Maybe someone had said something to her over the last day, or she heard someone say something. Maybe it was something else. Nell had been acting a little weird ever since she got back from the xeno ship, and, granted, Nell had always been a little weird – she was a fucking communist, for one thing – but this wasn’t the usual Nell weirdness. He shook his head. *Shit’s above my pay grade, that’s for sure*. Then again, so was everything that had happened since he’d agreed to work-release after the uprising. *Shit is absolutely fucked*.

He settled in behind the wheel of the truck, began warming it up. The soft whine of the engine’s capacitors as they spun up gradually faded, and he took the time to check the night-vision specs resting on the dash. *Good*, he thought. *Fully charged. No one fucked off and forgot after the last run*. He slid them on and let them rest on his forehead. When Nell finally got into the passenger seat, he was ready.

“All set?” She nodded. “Okay. Where to?”

“We’re going to Twin Creeks Station, then over the mountain pass to Elysium. Figure we can get to the hideaway at False Oaks before sunup.”

“Mmmm. It’ll be tight. Best not waste time. Everyone set back there?” When she nodded, he stepped on the gas. As the light from the garage faded behind them, he pulled the specs down and switched them on, bathing the world in front of him in a brilliant pale-green composite pulled from passive IR and optical light amplification. The sun was already a fading memory, a strange brilliant stain to the southwest that made the rearview mirrors shine a little too bright in his peripheral vision as the specs’ gating system tried to step the image down.

Nell’s watch chirped. “Well, there goes the broadcast,” she said, sighing. “We’re committed to Case Dandelion, now.”

“The fuck did we call it that for?” Nikolai said.

“Because when we came up with it, we obviously didn’t think we’d be fighting fucking plant xenos,” Nell grumbled. “Stars, I wish they’d never showed up. Just finished off the Accord and let us be. Things were getting better. We were going to have a decent summer this year. Maybe snowmelt above the lowlands, even.”

“Yeah,” Nikolai muttered, slowing to take a sharp corner as the road switchbacked up the mountain.

“I mean, imagine it, Niko – we could have built a world without blah blah blah bourgeoisie, blah blah materialism, blah blah blah proletariat.” She was going into one of her communism rants again, but at this point, tuning it out was instinctive for Nikolai. All he had to do was nod, maybe say a word or two, and she’d run out of steam eventually and they could talk about something normal. “Blah blah historical inevitability!”

“Tell me about it,” he said. The sun dipped further below the horizon, and he could actually see out the rearview mirrors properly now. Bulwark wasn’t visible, but the massive bulk of the weed transport shuttle was. *Probably unloading by now*, he thought. *Looking for terrans to hand out their little goodies to*. They’d tried to bribe him, but he’d turned the thing down flat. Just the memory of the way it moved, the way its mouth was full of little needle-like thorns, the way it played at looking human, made his stomach want to tie itself in a knot. *Creepy fucking things*.

Why couldn’t it have been the Accord that showed up? He could have talked his way out of a prison sentence with them. Maybe even gotten Nell credit for good behavior – he could bullshit that, and if she was smart (which, despite the communism thing, she generally was) she’d play along. Shit, maybe she could even get paroled if they shacked up officially. And he had three years of back pay coming, didn’t he? He could have landed a trip back home, a hero’s welcome, vid tours of all the networks about how he’d survived against all odds during an illegal uprising. Book deals! Shit, maybe they’d make a movie about him.

How the fuck did these creepy weeds beat us? He’d been trying to wrap his head around it ever since Nell got back. She was *scared* of them now, not just wary like she’d been before. She’d always been a pessimist, though, and communists were cowards to begin with or they’d never fall for such obvious bullshit like *no one should have to work to live*. Where the hell would have that gotten humanity? Not the top of the evolutionary heap, that was for stars-damned sure. Well, maybe she’d see how ridiculous she’d been up to now, now she could see where it led. He’d help get her through this, they’d fight off the weeds, and then – what, rebuild? Work on liberating other terran worlds? It seemed like the next logical step. But the problem remained: how had they managed to steamroll the most advanced civilization in the history of the known cosmos?

I mean, they’re just fucking plants, and communist plants on top of it. How the hell could they beat the Cosmic Navy? It was the most efficient military machine ever created! Nikolai had seen vids of the kind of shit they carried: railguns that could fire a slug at practically the speed of light and put a pinhole in a credit chit from halfway across the system, projected energy weapons that could boil the plating right off an enemy ship from thousands of kilometers away, even theoretical mockups of bizarre hypermetric shit that was based on hearsay and rumor but that would pretty much obsolete any other kind of weapon imaginable sometime in the next ten years.

It had to be an inside job. That was the only explanation that made even a little sense. Somehow, the weeds had gotten their wormheads into positions of power, and they’d either sabotaged the war effort or just flat-out surrendered to the weeds the minute they rolled up.

His knuckles went white on the wheel, and he was steering purely on autopilot now, his conscious mind consumed with righteous indignation at the idea of the greatest betrayal in all of terran history. *When I get off this planet*, he thought – and, for the moment, precisely how he'd do that was an admittedly open question – *those weeds are gonna rue the day they fucked with us*.

"How about this one?" The terran girl lifted her head, in part because she was being addressed and in part because the petting had stopped. The offending hand, Pisca's right, was pointing at one name in a long list displayed on a tablet the size of a family vidscreen, which she held in her left hand.

"Uhm…Alecto? Hmmm." She thought it over. "It's fun to say, but what does it mean?" She reached up and tapped the name on the tablet, which brought up a small article pulled from one terran mainframe or another. "…oh, no, that's not me at *all*," she said.

"Oooh. You're right, flower, that doesn't fit you even a little bit" Pisca said, paging back to the list and scrolling down. "Well, plenty more names where that came from. Whoever these Greek terrans are, they certainly had an awful lot of heroes and deities and such to name. Oh, look, here's Cassandra! Isn't that Cass's full name?"

"Y-yeah," the girl said, her cheeks going as red as her hair. *Don't dig, please don't dig*, she pleaded silently – the last thing she wanted was to have to explain *why* she wanted a name from Greek mythology. That would get embarrassing incredibly quickly, even if Pisca would probably think it was absurdly cute. Pisca thought *everything* she did was cute. "So, can't take that one," she added, prompting Pisca to go on.

"No, I suppose not. Things could get very confusing with *two* cuties named Cassandra running around. Oooh! Daphne?"

She sat with that for a moment as well, crawling fully up into Pisca's lap and leaning against her for a better view of the tablet. She could hear the gentle sounds from inside Pisca so much better here. "Hmmm. Maybe? Put that on the short list."

"Put that on the short list….?" Pisca stroked the terran girl's hair, sending shivers up her spine and prompting her to look up into those beautiful, impossibly deep eyes. Every time she did this, they seemed to take up more and more space in the world, in her mind, in her heart.

"Put that on the short list… please?" she said, swallowing heavily. *Stars, she's amazing*.

"Good girl," Pisca purred, tapping away at the tablet, and even thought she hadn't thought it possible, the terran girl melted even further, as if her insides were turning into a warm, soupy, giggly mess. She closed her eyes and let her head loll against Pisca's chest, running her fingers over the prickly needles one by one. The gentle rumblings welling up from within Pisca were like the world's most comforting lullaby, and as she listened to Pisca read off name after name, she had to fight to keep herself from drifting off. The short list grew, name by name.

This is more work than I thought it'd be, she thought. *I wish we'd had a working library terminal for more than a couple months after the Revolution. Then maybe I could have looked up good names before now*. She had to laugh at herself. *As long as I'm wishing, I might as well wish for the Revolution to have worked better. For Landfall to still be there, and all the medical treatment facilities, so I could have started this years ago. For the Affini to have gotten here before I got sent to Solstice*.

But, no – if she'd never been sent to Solstice, she'd never have met Cass in the first place, might never have realized what the horrible, unscratchable itch in the back of her mind her whole life had been. Maybe the Affini would have known anyway. Pisca certainly seemed to see right through her, but then, Pisca was *Pisca*. She was basically perfect.

"… how do you even pronounce that?" Pisca said, leaning into look at one name. "P'to… no, not that one," she added, scrolling away from it. "It's very much not you."

"Huh? Oh, right, definitely not me," she agreed, having not even seen the name. *And it all came out alright in the end*, she reminded herself. *They're here now. They'll help us. Pisca said so*. The others were being so standoffish about it – even Cass, who she thought would have been much more reasonable than Nell – but hopefully they'd come around. *Who cares about ideology when the Affini have already solved all the problems we'd ever encounter?*

"Thelx-in-oh?" Pisca shook her head. "I think we're into the hard-to-pronounce section," she muttered as she continued to scroll down. "You know, none of this was in the primer they gave me when I was studying your species, petal. I'm starting to think I should write to the Office of Sophont Interaction & Acclimation and tell them they need to include an entire section about these Greek terrans and how you're supposed to say these names."

"If it helps, I don't know how to pronounce most of these either," the terran girl admitted.

"Well, we're getting to the end. Shall we look over that short list, or try another source?"

"Maybe?" She straightened, reached out, and tried to tap the icon for the list Pisca had been making, but accidentally hit the button to scroll to the top of the document. "Ooops. Sorry! I was trying to–" She paused, suddenly transfixed. How had she missed that name the first time around? Had she been spacing out? She was certain she'd remember having seen it, because something in it seemed to call to her. She reached out and tapped the name "Aletheia." Detail after detail spilled forth, and all of it felt so very right.

Aletheia. She took a deep breath, let her eyes fall closed. *Am I Aletheia? Hi, I'm Aletheia.* She felt something cool and comfortable break over her, like her whole body was a muscle that had been clenched and that suddenly relaxed. *Oh, that fits*. *Hi, I'm Aletheia. Allie for short!* She felt her face twist into an excited grin, her heart turning over and her face flushing.

"Oh," Pisca said, looking down at her. "I think I know what that look means. Are you an Aletheia, little petal?"

The wave of joy left no doubts in her mind. Aletheia nodded, and turned to bury her face in Pisca's chest before she could see how red it had gotten. "Allie for short," she mumbled.

“Allie for short,” Pisca repeated, stroking Aletheia’s hair. “What a lovely name for a lovely girl. A lovely girl who, I think, deserves a treat for picking out a name for herself.”

“A treat?” She looked up at Pisca again. Her eyes seemed to swallow her, and it took effort to speak.”What, like ice cream?”

“We did ice cream yesterday,” Pisca said, one finger gently lifting Allie’s chin. “I was thinking something more like this.” A vine drifted into Allie’s field of view, at its tip a vibrantly orange flower with a needle-thin thorn at its heart, wet and shining. “I had this grafted just for you, little one – a fun little Class-A playtime, whenever I want.” She laughed, and it rolled through Allie’s soul like waves breaking on the shore.

“I don’t know, I’ve– I’ve never really *done* anything like that.” She’d tried to smoke cannabis once, but had coughed so hard and so long as the harsh smoke hit her throat that, if she felt any of the high, it was lost in the misery. Then again, all the people on the Orientation channel Pisca had showed her seemed to really love Class-As. Maybe this would be a better experience, and she could tell Pisca really wanted it – she could feel the want in her enormous, beautiful eyes that burned with a light that seemed to drive her fears away. “I’m willing to try, though,” she added, biting her lip and shivering just a little.

“Good girl,” Pisca said, stroking Allie’s hair and cuddling her tightly. Vines began to coil around her arms, her legs, her body. Somewhere in the midst of all that, there was a barely noticed pinch. “What a good girl you are,” she repeated, and now her voice was like her eyes too, warm and bright and deep enough to drown in. Allie’s breath caught in her throat as she realized how *small* she was before this incredible, numinous being – and then the xenodrugs hit.

It started as a warmth, spreading out from where the pinch had been, like a hot shower tracing out where Pisca’s vines gripped her. The warmth spread, penetrating her down to her core and rushing up to her head, and *oh*, she thought, *now I get it*. Her face seemed to draw itself into a smile all on its own, and her mind seemed to float just out of synch with her brain inside her skull. Every stroke of Pisca’s hand, every caress of her vines, was magnified in a way that Allie could never have been prepared for.

“How’s that, little one?” Pisca’s voice was like a breeze whipping around her, buffeting her like a falling leaf that never quite fell to earth. Allie forced her eyes to focus, and marveled at how Pisca only got more beautiful every time she looked up at her.

“G-good,” she managed to say, and that only after a tremendous effort. It wasn’t that her lips were heavy, or that she couldn’t feel them, but that something seemed to be between her and her body, and that mysterious something felt incredibly good whenever either encountered it. Every inch of her skin tingled, and every thought she had echoed in glorious, impromptu harmony with itself. “Like…this…”

“You like this?” Pisca laughed, and Allie was in no way prepared for it. It was as if she was a book having its pages riffled, or the sand pouring through an hourglass – there was *movement*, gentle but irresistible, that pulled her along. Her mouth fell open, and she tried to speak, but only a soft, needy whimper emerged. *Do I sound like that?* she thought, and the thought gave her such delight she feared, for just an instant, it might burn her like a fire.

Imagine, she thought – and now even that took effort – *Imagine how I'll sound after the Class Gs have had a chance to* really *work*.

"My little Aletheia," Pisca murmured, stroking her hair and cuddling her up close. She was warm and comfy, and the texture of her bark against Allie's skin was pure heaven. The gentle thrumming inside Pisca now penetrated Allie's body, a shaking that resolved into what felt like being gently rocked back and forth. She was bobbing on an ocean, the waves rolling under her. "Good Allie," Pisca whispered. "Oh, I'm keeping you. There's no question about it." Allie's eyes fluttered open – when had she closed them? – and she saw Pisca looming over her. "My Allie," she thrummed, the pools of her eyes opening up to reveal endless depths within. "*All mine*."

"Mmmm…" Aletheia could scarcely respond as Pisca's voice swept through her. *She's keeping me*, she thought, and what a comforting thought it was. Somewhere inside her she felt a mote of concern, a passing worry about what that meant, but then Pisca's hand came down on her head again in a long, slow stroke that drove any doubt from her mind.

I want this. To call it a thought did it no justice: this was a bone-deep knowing, a fundamental truth Aletheia had discovered about herself as the Class-A stripped away all pretense, all self-deception. She could lie here, in Pisca's lap, forever, and she'd never once regret it.

Pisca wouldn't let her. What bliss, what comfort, it was to know that.

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter again. Alas, deadlines intrude, but making time despite them to put good vibes out into the world definitely helps keep me from stressing out. Weird how doing something you like makes you feel good, huh?

Chapter 11: Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

> For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

> In which a small mistake is made.
> Content warnings: More of Cass's creepy violence dreams, and a bad trip on xenodrugs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The air smelled like smoke – not smoke from the campfire, but from the rapidly spreading wildfires to the south. It was drifting high in the air and staining what little sunset was visible strange colors. The two dead men had taken her mask, such as it was, but the particulates in the air were the least of her concerns with her hands bound behind her back with a ziptie.

“I still say we shoot her,” one of the dead men – the one holding the gauss pistol – said. It was an RM-6E; an old but still serviceable model, but made bulbous and ugly by the extraneous “tactical” additions, like the overcharged capacitor bank and the slide-rail. “She’s the fuckin’ queen commie! This shit’s all her fault!”

“Dumbass, they’re gonna be out for blood after *that*,” the second dead man said, nodding south towards the reddish glare that used to be Landfall. His arms were crossed over his chest, hiding the entry wounds bleeding black down his khaki guard uniform. Was he a work-release case, or one of the ones who fled to the hills and never surrendered? “You think a bunch of communists who just got nuked are just gonna invite the ‘counterrevolutionary element’ back to their drum circle? They’re gonna need scapegoats. She’s our ticket out of a firing squad.”

It hadn’t been a nuclear weapon, fission or otherwise, Cass thought. It didn’t behave like one. Now, while the dead men argued, she could finally give herself space to think about it. It hadn’t been a funny flicker on the horizon that grew in brilliance that welled up into the sky – the light had come from on high, the sky already blinding before the pillar truly even formed. Why drop a nuclear device from orbit, after all, when you could simply sling an asteroid at anything you didn’t like with a few kilometers per second of delta-v? Rocks were quite a bit cheaper than bombs, even very fast rocks.

But it wasn't an asteroid that had hit Landfall. Even on a near vertical trajectory, there'd have been a fireball, an agonizing moment before the blast where the city's fate could be clearly apprehended. Whatever made the Pillar of Fire had been moving so blindingly fast that it had simply carved a channel through the atmosphere from vacuum to ground, a channel that then detonated outwards. Who needs a nuclear bomb when you can have a nuclear pillar for the price of a much, much faster rock – say, one moving close to the speed of light?

How had they done it? It was, even at humanity's level of technological development, not a trivial task to make even a very small something go that fast. *You'd need a linear cannon a mile long at least, wouldn't you?* The numbers eluded her. She would have to look this up when she got the chance – if she got the chance.

But Osbourne-Clark's zipties were as cheap as everything else they bought, and the rock she'd palmed had just enough of an edge to wear at it. The ties were biting her wrists raw, but she was nearly through by the time Gauss Pistol swore at Entry Wounds and stalked back over to her. "Get up! Get up, you fuck!" he added, kicking her when she didn't immediately get to her feet.

"Oh, what a piece of work is man," she muttered. "How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty." She felt a heavy blow on her left cheek – she staggered, but remained standing. The dead man did not know how to pistol-whip someone effectively, and it had been a glancing blow. Stupid. Risked damaging his weapon.

"Don't need any Marxist shit from you," he growled.

"That was Shakespeare," Cass said, running her tongue around her teeth. She tasted blood, but nothing had come loose.

"I don't care which fucking commie it was," Gauss Pistol retorted, pressing the muzzle up against her forehead. Stupid. Risked getting the electronics dirty from splashback when he fired. The man did not know guns. "It all ends up in the same place: the decent, hardworking man completely fucked. Well, guess who gets to fuck back now?"

"So your plan is to shoot me, then…what?" She raised an eyebrow and forced herself to meet his face. "Be in charge of the shitstorm that's going to come next? Do you know anything about survival? About logistics? About organizing a unified collective response to diaster?" She was staring at the hole in his head as she said her lines, the light of the campfire slowly fading and the darkness inside it seeming to swallow the world around her. *I have to pay attention*, she thought as the dream slipped away like dust sifting through fingers. The most important part was coming, and to live through the next five minutes, she needed to be ready. Next, Gauss Pistol do his third stupid thing, and then Cass would kill him.

But no. The dream faded, and the thick darkness of a fireglow night became the darkness of shut eyes and a pillow pressing against her face. She woke in the broad, impossibly comfortable bed that Tsuga had procured for her without her even asking – a bed that was blessedly normal-looking, on top of it. She stretched out and grabbed her tablet, waking it up to order a fresh outfit from the compiler. *How quickly we get used to luxuries*, she thought, sighing. *Single-use clothing?*

It did, at least, cut down on clutter. The room was empty of all the boxes now, and the hammock was gone. The bed took center stage, and Tsuga promised there'd be a desk and a proper wardrobe coming soon. Were they being handmade, like the bed?

She wished, not for the first time nor for the last, that the Affini Compact wasn't a massive imperialism-fueled excuse to take people as pets. She wished she could just *take joy* in good things being available, and in so many bad things being banished, without having to worry about ulterior motives or underlying truths. And even if *some* florets, maybe even the majority if her experience so far proved accurate, were still capable of functioning independently, claiming that decision on their behalf just didn't wash.

I just have to hope that the plan works, she thought as she dragged herself out of bed. *That we can make the prospect of hunting us all down individually unsustainable for them.* After all, there were other sophonts in need, other sophonts that actually *needed* Affini help, and every moment wasted searching for sophonts that didn't want to be found was a moment that could have gone towards helping those other, less fortunate sophonts, right? That are fairly straightforward logic, and even if the Affini were weird, it seemed sound from their perspective. If fighting was out, and negotiating was out, this was their last, best hope.

And if that failed? *Well*, Cass told herself*, if it does, we're fucked. So we'll just have to make sure it doesn't fail*.

Breakfast was warmed-over fesenjoon from the night before – Cass had showed Tsuga how to make it, dredging it up from deep scent-memories from her childhood of cooking with her father – but warmed over wasn't the word, because when Tsuga handed her the bowl it was as warm and fresh as it had been when the pot had gone in the refrigerator. "How in the world– no, don't tell me," she added as Tsuga began to answer. "Let me preserve at least one mystery here."

"It's not that mysterious," Tsuga said, making a passably good shrug and squatting down next to Cass's table. "But alright."

Cass only smiled in return, taking another spoonful of the thick stew. The pomegranate flavor was still sweet and sharp amid the savory essence of walnut – she'd made the sauce from scratch, scoring and cracking the compiled pomegranate and squeezing the juices out of the liberated arils inside. It had been over two decades since she'd had pomegranate, and it had brought her close to tears when she'd tasted it. "So, what are you doing today?"

"I have a meeting with the ecological engineering team in a little while," Tsuga said. "I'm going to present my findings and we're going to start planning large-scale remediation."

"Mmmm." Cass nodded while she worked on the fesenjoon. "Will Pisca be there too?"

"She may," Tsuga said, "but I doubt it. She hasn't been very active in the overnet discussion thus far. I think she might a bit distracted. It's alright, though," she added. "This is mostly high-level planning, and she's at least a century away from being in a position where she might contribute to that. It'd be useful experience, of course, but it's best to learn by doing for a while first before one starts playing around with theory and design."

“Well, you’re the expert,” Cass said noncommittally, thinking it over. *Distracted is one way to put it*, she thought. “You’re feeling alright, though? Yesterday was…rough.”

“…it was,” she agreed, her bark shifting a little. “But I’m glad we had that conversation. If nothing else, it’s the only time someone has listened to be talk about it without immediately suggesting that getting a floret would cheer me up.”

Cass snorted, shaking her head. “I think you can rely on me to be fairly consistent about that.” She took another few spoonfuls, and Tsuga sat in silence as she did so. “…actually,” Cass added, “if you’re okay with it, I did have another question. Just a general one, not really specific to what we talked about.”

“Of course,” Tsuga said. “I very much hope I can help you understand the Compact and feel more comfortable here.”

“Leaving that aside – how do you decide? I mean you as in the Affini. How do you decide whether a floret gets to stay functional or stays toasted 24 hours a day?” She left of the *and why do you think you deserve to make that decision*. Baby steps.

“That’s entirely up to the Affini and the floret in question,” Tsuga said, her tone as casual as if she were discussing the weather. “Whatever is best for the floret. For some, that means heavy doses of xenodrugs.”

“Right, but how do you decide? What are the criteria involved?” Tsuga affected a sigh. Knowing that she didn’t need to breathe, it felt a little odd, but it *was* where a terran would sigh if they wanted to express a bit of frustration. *Oh, wait, she’s frustrated with me?*

“Again, it’s just– it’s what’s best for the floret. That’s always what motivates an Affini, Cass. Given what you’ve experienced, and your own beliefs, if what little I’ve read of Mr. Bakunin is anything to go by, I understand that you likely don’t believe that, but it’s very, very true.”

“I can believe that you’re incredibly defensive of them,” Cass said. “I was there. I saw what the Captain did to Nell.” Hell, she’d *felt* it, the barest fringes of it, and it had felt like she was being stalked by some kind of horrible extinct apex predator. She couldn’t begin to imagine what it had been like for Nell.

“That was… a very understandable reaction on eir part, honestly,” Tsuga said. “After all, if she’s willing to say things like that to us, who knows what she’s saying to others when we aren’t present, and what they might hear, and what they might repeat in the hearing of others, especially florets.”

“Okay,” Cass said, holding up a hand. “Let me put it this way. One of the florets I met yesterday told me that his– ugh, his owner, when he was captured, he tried to charge him with a grenade, and the Affini took it from him and basically fell on it. He fell on a grenade to protect this random guy who was trying to kill him.”

Tsuga smiled. “I think I remember hearing about that. Before my time here, though. It’s a very sweet story. And what a brave little sophont, though I do feel sorry he felt he had to do something like that.”

“My point is, I’m having trouble wrapping my brain around *that*, let alone doing what the Captain did to Nell over saying something mean.”

“Affini will do *anything* for florets, Cass,” Tsuga said. “*Anything*, to ensure that they are loved, well cared for, and happy. It’s as intrinsic to us as respiration is to you.”

“So…” Her mind turned the situation over. She hadn’t learned much, but she’d confirmed her suspicions at least. A quote bubbled up: “Being myself no stranger to suffering, I have learned to relieve the sufferings of others.” *Oh, Virgil*, she thought, *you had no idea*.

Tsuga leaned in a little closer, still smiling. Her new face really *did* make it look better – either that, or she was getting more practiced at it in general. “I am always struck*,”* she said, “how you always seem to have something interesting to say.”

“I mean…I spent 20 years obsessively reading books when I wasn’t obsessively planning for a revolution,” Cass said, scratching the back of her neck nervously. “Some of it stayed up there, I guess.”

“I could sit here and listen to you talk all day,” Tsuga said. What was that warmth in her voice? Cass couldn’t quite place it, and by the time she was starting to process it, Tsuga was already straightening up. “Unfortunately, I do have to get to that meeting. I’m very sorry. Perhaps we can continue the discussion later?”

“Sure,” Cass said, craning her neck to look up at Tsuga. “I’ll figure dinner out and get what I need.”

“I look forward to our next mutual culinary adventure,” Tsuga said. “Until then.”

Cass watched her go, and sat in silence as she finished her fesenjoon. Thought filled the vacuum. *Anything for florets*, she thought, *except let them make decisions for themselves.* There was something she was missing, something she hadn’t quite wrapped her head around – she could feel the silhouette of the idea in her mind, but grasping it was like trying to grab her own shadow. *If I can just figure out what this is, maybe everything will click into place. Maybe that’ll give me what I need to stop this all from happening.*

But she wouldn’t figure it out just by sitting here and smacking her head against the problem. When she encountered a problem like this, it was often better to think laterally – do something unrelated, and let the problem percolate in the background until a solution presented itself. Otherwise, she’d get nothing done all day, and there was one thing she needed to do, someone she needed to talk to who, in all likelihood, *would* shed some light on her main problem.

She decompiled the empty bowl, took a quick shower – hot water pouring on her like a waterfall was still a novelty after three years of washcloth baths – and dressed in her fresh clothes. A tank top much like the last joined a pair of trousers with a much more agreeable texture, and the jacket as ever completed the ensemble. She walked out the door like there was nothing unusual about stepping into a cylindrical habitat kilometers across.

The communal hab that Cass had never so much as spent a single night in was empty – not only empty but absolutely cleaned out. There was only one other place she could think to look, and thankfully, a quick search on her tablet gave her a map to her destination. The door it led to was not the first door Cass had seen aboard the *Tillandsia* that remained closed as she approached. It was, however, the first that spoke to her.

"Just a sec, cutie!" it said in a cheerful, androgynous voice. "I'll let everyone know you're here!"

"O...kay," Cass said. *Weird doorbell*. A moment later, the door slid aside, and Cass had to crane her neck upward.

"Cass!" Pisca said, her voice bright. "What a lovely surprise! Come in, come in!" There was a hand at her back and a gentle pressure that brooked no disagreement. Pisca's hab was like a less intense version of Tsuga's – it had a lot of the same aesthetics, and Cass had to wonder if that was Tsuga's influence or if Affini homes were just like this. She had a soft-looking couch, and on it she saw the person she'd come for – sprawled out, clearly high, and wearing a long, flowing dress that stopped somewhere just below the knee.

Wait, what?

"Hey, wake up, sleepylegs," Pisca said, leaning over the couch and poking them gently. "I didn't give you *that* much. Besides, look, Cass is here!" *That* got their attention – they bolted upright, only overbalancing a little, and stared down at Cass.

"Wh-what?! I– oh no, oh no, uh…"

"Here, let me help you down," Pisca said, picking them up and setting them down in front of Cass. They wobbled, unsteady at first, until they got their balance, then hugged themselves and looked up at Cass past a curtain of wavy red hair that just reached their chin.

Cass stood there for a second as her mind turned the situation over. This wasn't nearly so much a conundrum as her other, bigger problems, though – the solution arrived quickly. *Oh*. Everything fit. It was obvious, and she was annoyed with herself that she hadn't noticed it before. "Come here," she said, wrapping her arms around the girl and squeezing her gently. This was definitely a hugging sort of situation. There would probably be tears and– yep, right on schedule, the redhead began to cry, burying her face into Cass's shoulder. "It's okay," she whispered, stroking her hair. "You're okay."

"I'm sorry," she wailed through her tears.

"You don't have anything to apologize for," Cass replied. "Honestly, everything makes a lot more sense now."

"But…you're mad 'cause I wanna stay with Pisca," she whimpered.

"I was worried you were making a big decision without thinking it through," Cass said, "but like I said, it makes more sense now. If they'd shown up before I'd transitioned, I'd probably have done the same thing." She still thought that staying up here – staying with Pisca – was a

terrible idea, but she at least understood *why* she wanted that now. “How long have you known?”

She sniffled. “I dunno. I think maybe when I met you.” *Oh, no*. Cass felt those words right in her heart. “You’re really not mad?”

“No. Not about you wanting to stay, and *especially* not about this.” She thought back to her own tearful confession to her father, when she’d been even younger than– *Ah. Right.* “Have you picked out a name?” she asked gently.

She nodded, face still buried in Cass’s shoulder. “Aletheia.”

“Aletheia?” Cass smiled. *The spirit of truth? Went right for the old standbys, I see.*

“Allie for short,” she mumbled.

“Well, Allie, let me tell you what my father told me when I came out to him,” Cass said. “Look at me, okay?” She gently lifted Allie’s chin, and steeled herself to look into those deep, blown-out green eyes. “Only you and the Infinite can know the shape of your soul, so don’t let anyone else tell you who or what you have to be. Okay?” He’d said it in Farsi, but that was close enough.

“Okay,” she breathed. Tearstains still carved wet runnels down her cheeks as she looked up at Cass. Her stare was painfully intense, but Cass knew better than to look away in a moment like this. If there was one thing she could still do for Aletheia, she could give her surety that she was accepted as she was.

And then, without any warning, without any sign that it was about to happen, Aletheia stood on her tiptoes and pressed her lips against Cass’s. Her arms snaked around Cass’s neck and she hung there, her eyes slipping shut as she kissed Cass, soft noises trickling up from her throat almost overwhelmed by the delighted sound that Pisca made, by the loud wooden *clack* of her hands as she clapped excitedly.

Wait, what?

The kiss went on. It was actually happening, not some weird figment of Cass’s imagination. She stood there, puzzled, being kissed, for a long moment before she finally sorted out her thoughts and gently, gently, pushed Aletheia back. “What?”

“Oh *stars* that felt nice,” she mumbled. “Mmmm, I’ve wanted to do that for *so long*,” she added, leaning back in and resting her head on Cass’s shoulder.

“Hold on–”

“How *adorable!*” Pisca said, laughing and all but bouncing in place, her vines twisting and shivering. “Oh, this *definitely* calls for a celebration!”

“Why did you–” She stopped short of saying it. Saying it would make it real. More real, somehow, than it already was.

“Because you’re amazing and cool and really nice and did I mention really, really hot?” Aletheia said, giggling in a very familiar way.

“Aletheia, I’m old enough to be your mother,” Cass said gently.

“I don’t care,” she replied.

“Well, I do,” Cass said. “You and I are in such different places in our life, and–” She paused as a vine drifted close to her, tipped with a bright orange flower with something shining at its heart. “What’s that?”

“Just a little playtime juice,” Pisca said, leaning down and putting a hand on Cass’s shoulders. “A little Class-A to make you feel nice and good.”

“It’s *really* good,” Aletheia said, giggling again. Now that the stress was gone, she was sinking back into the high.

“I don’t really do intoxicants,” Cass said. Wasn’t *supposed* to, either, but then, she was not particularly observant about other strictures – the only reason she’d never indulged was because she’d never seen the point.

“This isn’t like those nasty terran intoxicants,” Pisca said. “It’s clean, healthy, and safe. You remember Arvense? I asked him, and he said this particular xenodrug is perfectly safe for all baseline terrans. Aletheia’s having a great time with it, aren’t you petal?” She reached down and stroked Allie’s head, and she let out a happy whimper.

“It just makes everything feel nice,” Allie murmured. “And a little floaty, but just a little.”

Cass was silent for a moment. She had no idea how to extricate herself from this situations she’d gotten herself into with Aletheia, and that was bad enough, but adding in being high on top of it did not sound like it would help. On the other hand – maybe this was the breakthrough she needed. Maybe getting a little blasted, having a taste of what Leah and now apparently Allie were going through, was the lateral jaunt that would clue her in to what she was missing about the Affini.

“A small dose. A *very* small dose,” she added. “I don’t want to get completely obliterated on this stuff.”

“Alright, flower,” Pisca said, her vine darting in and delivering a quick pinprick to her collarbone. “Oooh, I can’t wait!”

“Just don’t expect me to–” She paused as she felt the warm sensation spreading through her arm, across the skin, into the rest of her body. “To–” She swallowed, and felt every muscle convulsing in turn, all the way down her esophagus. “This– this is–” She took a breath, felt her lungs expanding. “I– I can’t–”

“Here, let’s get you two up on the sofa again,” Pisca said. Her vines coiled around Cass and Aletheia, squeezing them together, and every inch of the vines felt like a line of tingling

electric current. The fabric of Aletheia's dress was like sandpaper, and the sofa if anything, worse worse, gritty and scraping.

“Too much,” she grunted, struggling out of Allie’s arms and leaving the confused girl blinking as she tore off her jacket, her tank top, her trousers. “Get it off, get it off, get it off!” Everything was fire, lightning, rasping and cutting and scoring her skin. The inside of her body wasn’t any better – with every movement, she could feel muscle on muscle on bone, her skin sliding and bulging as insides moved around. She could feel her entire digestive system convulsing, feel the blood rushing in her arteries. Her heart thundered in her chest, in her ears, the sound like a staccato waterfall threatening to burst her from the inside out. *I’m dying*, she thought as she curled over, trying to keep as much of her skin off of the sofa’s awful, scratching surface as she could. *It’s poison, and my heart’s going to explode*.

“Cass, what’s wrong?” Allie’s hand came down on Cass’s back, a crackling thunderblow that elicited a primal scream from somewhere inside her, ripping its way through her trachea and setting up intolerable resonances in her larynx. “Pisca, help her!”

“I don’t understand, Arvense said it was safe!” Pisca cried. “We’re going over there right now. Cass, I’m sorry, but I have to pick you up.” Vines again, burning, stinging, drilling, carving into her skin as she screamed and screamed and screamed. Pisca said something, but language was a dead thing to Cass now – dead in her throat, in her ears, and in her mind. There were no words for what she was feeling as the wind skated across her skin, as the light dug into her eyes, as sounds drove themselves like bullets into her ears. There was no separation between the screaming and the things that made her scream. She wasn’t even certain if she *was* still screaming, or if the blackness clawing at the edges of her vision meant she’d screamed herself hypoxic and was on the verge of blessed unconsciousness.

The nightmare thought of *what if this follows me down there* surfaced, for only the briefest of moments, above the choppy, whitecap surface of the ocean that was her panic. Then, it too slipped into the deep.

Chapter End Notes

And that's how Pisca learned that xenodrug applications are not as universal among terrans as she thought.
(Don't worry, Cass will be fine. <3)

Chapter 12: Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

In which lessons are learned, and in which Tsuga experiences *extreme pining*.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The lovely thing about meetings, especially meetings consisting primarily of engineers and scientists, is that when you went first and started the discussion, and all the engineers and scientists who had a long history of working together without you present started talking solutions and planning, you could immediately let yourself be distracted by whatever other, more pressing, and far more complex problems you had, instead of something boring and simple like planetary-scale ecological remediation.

So perhaps there is hope for me yet. Tsuga could not believe she had those words out loud. Was it not embarrassing enough that she'd stressed herself out to the point of dropping needles in front of Cass? She absolutely had to try to be clever about subtly signaling her feelings? As if anything about that sentence was *subtle*. There was absolutely no way there would be a Hope for her.

"One matter that's been passed along by the xenosociology team," one of the geoengineers – Cymosa, was it? – said. "They'd like us to take especial care during the warming phase when it comes to glacial runoff in the northeastern quadrant of the main continent. Apparently there are some structures of there of historical interest from the previous colony, the one operated by… Quakers?" She squinted at her tablet. "Geologists, I suppose."

This morning, she'd somehow been *worse*. What had transpired in those few hours Cass had been asleep? She'd been awake most of them, working on her report for this very discussion, her thoughts focused in the main on the problem at hand. She'd only looked in on Cass a handful of times, when the sounds of her slumbering were disturbed by grunts and distressed moans. She had kept her distance and maintained boundaries – and then muddled it all up in the morning by, without even realizing she was doing it until it was too late, flirting with the little grey-stripe terran even more obviously. She'd left as quickly as she could once she realized what she was doing.

“Have we considered that a soletta might be the best solution? Elegant, simple, and keeps the biosphere nice and clean.” One of the older scientists – and Tsuga remembered he had a background in optics – was addressing the meeting now. Of course he was offering a solution that involved placing lenses to intensify the local star’s light on the planetary surface.

Anyway, even *if* Cass wanted to be a floret – which she very much did not – Tsuga reminded herself that she was in no position to provide care for a sophont, even a sophont as self-sufficient as Cass was. She was neither qualified nor suited to the task temperamentally. She was shamefully unreliable in a way that did not become an Affini. The best thing, in that case, would be to find a home for her with someone willing to let her visit regularly. Surely there was an Affini somewhere that Cass would find agreeable. And who wouldn’t want such a bright little sophont to call their own?

Tsuga certainly wished she could. But those were thoughts she needed to excise, for Cass’s sake.

“Tsuga, do you have any input on the matter?” Ulmus, the chair of the meeting and the nominal head of the Geoengineering Response Committee, was looking directly at her.

“Hm?” She had lost the conversation entirely as she wallowed. “I’m sorry, I’m afraid I was a bit distracted.”

“You’ve been on the surface,” they said. “What’s your opinion on the working conditions?”

“Ah. Well,” she said, rising to her feet, “simply put, it’s uncomfortably cold. Dangerously cold, for those who are poorly cold-adapted. I was able to tolerate it, but even I wouldn’t want to be down there long-term without somewhere to warm up. Without heating or an antifreeze additive, expect to lose foliage and even small vines to frost, especially if you’re out and about at night. The good news is, we’re coming into local summer, and according to both our meteorological report and my discussions with local terrans, it should be warm enough to–” She paused. In her chest, her tablet was chirping. “I’m sorry, one moment.” She opened up her chest cavity and extracted her tablet, glancing down at it. She froze in mute horror as her eyes traveled across the delicate Affini script.

> <TheBestMedicine> Tsuga, please come to my practice as soon as possible. She’s okay now, but Cass had a minor accident.

“…I’m sorry, I have to go,” she said, shoving the tablet back inside herself and bolting for the door without waiting for a response. By the time she hit the walkway, her terran-like form was falling away. Even its long steps were far, far too slow, and by the time she felt grass and moss under her feet again she was falling into a old, familiar form, hexapedal, galloping along in long bounds as she ignored walkways and flung herself across open parks, through wooded greenbelts, up and over habitats.

What happened, what happened, what happened?! It didn’t matter that Arvense had assured her that Cass was alright – something was churning inside her core, like her very sap was boiling. *I have to help her*. The thought echoed throughout her mind even though she knew full well that if Arvense was calling her in, the crisis was over. Rationally, there was nothing to fear, but she nevertheless felt fear beyond terror. *This can’t happen, it can’t, it can’t.*

Not again.

If she could have fired herself like a mass driver payload directly across the ring from the meeting space to Arvense's practice, she would have done it. As it was, she only made slightly worse time. She didn't bother introducing herself or waiting for the little terran behind the reception desk – the only thing that brought her scrambling to a halt was Arvense himself, standing in the corridor with his arms outstretched. She barely stopped before she plowed into and through him.

"***Where is she?!***" Her voice resonated up and down the corridor, echoing back upon itself. Her body seethed with motion, abandoning shape entirely as her vines twisted and writhed with sheer anxiety. "***Where?!***"

"Tsuga, calm yourself," Arvense said. The amorphous Affini's voice was pitched low, soothing and steady – this was clearly not the first time he'd had to settle an Affini concerned over a floret. Sophont. Cass was *not* a floret, much less Tsuga's floret. "She's fine. I have her in one of my observation rooms, and her little friend Aletheia is there with her – so if you go in right now, like this, even if you don't manage to scare Cass, I can guarantee you *will* scare her. So please, take a moment, compose yourself, and I'll tell you what happened. Alright?"

Aletheia? Who's Aletheia? Anxiety rippled throughout Tsuga's body, but she managed to force it back into something approximating a bipedal shape. "What happened?!"

"She was given a small dose of a Class-A xenodrug that didn't mesh well with her sensorium, and she had a very nasty panic attack," Arvense told her. "There was no pharmacological damage, just stress. I sedated her, gave her the counteragent, then woke her up on a light dose of Class-E to keep her heart rate down. She was tachycardic when she came in, but I imaged her heart and there's no permanent damage."

"Who dosed her?" Tsuga hissed as she tried to focus on reassembling her face. Whoever it was, she was going to give them an earful.

Arvense hesitated. "It was Pisca. Before you charge off," he added hastily as Tsuga's form nearly flew apart again, "she didn't know about Cass's tactile hypersensitivity."

Hypersensitivity? "What hypersensitivity?"

"…you didn't know either?" He looked genuinely confused. "But you've been living with her."

"Yes, of course. She never went back to the communal hab with the others." She was mostly back together now, but everything still felt like it was fit together wrong, and she kept shuffling her vines and bark around anxiously.

"Then how can you not know? I showed her the slightest physical affection after I examined her and she had a very visceral reaction. You never saw this?"

"She…never seemed overfond of affectionate gestures, it's true" Tsuga said. "But those few times I did touch her, she never protested!"

Arvense affected a sigh. “I think I see what’s going on. She let me get through her entire exam, during which I poked and prodded her every which way, before she told me it was uncomfortable for her. I *thought* I’d made it clear she shouldn’t do that.”

“That’s not like her at all,” Tsuga protested. “She’s *very* outspoken.”

“She’s not the first terran who’s done this in my experience,” Arvense said. “Some are just like that – they refuse to discuss what they see as flaws in themselves. The reasons behind it vary from case to case, but it causes me no end of grief as a veterinarian. I’m starting to think Class-Ds should be prescribed to terrans by default.”

Tsuga’s emotions surged as she combed her memories, searching for the signs she’d missed and enumerating each and every way she’d somehow failed Cass, but this time she managed to keep her shape mostly stable. One thing stayed in central focus the entire time, though. “… may I see her now, please?”

“Of course,” he replied. “This way.” He led her to a door like so many others – inside was a rounded room with a broad window showing a projected view of Solstice, the terminator slowly creeping across its brightly lit face. In the room’s single bed, there were two terrans; Cass, laid out, looking frightfully small, pale and helpless; and her red-headed friend, sitting on the bed beside her, eyes limned in red from tears. *Aletheia? Wait, that’s– Oh.*

The redhead looked up first. “Tsuga!” Cass made a soft noise, but didn’t sit up. “Oh stars, Tsuga, I’m so sorry, please don’t be mad, I didn’t–”

“Hush,” Tsuga said as she crossed the room, leaning over Cass. Her eyes were open, but largely unfocused even as they turned to stare up at Tsuga. She was on Class-E, alright – she had the same look as a lot of other florets Tsuga had seen around the ship. She only just stopped her hand from stroking Cass’s hair – if what Arvense was true, and she had no reason to suspect otherwise, it would be the exact wrong thing to do in this circumstance. “This isn’t your fault, little one,” she went on. “It’s not your responsibility.”

Aletheia shook her head furiously. “But I said it would be okay! I said it would make everything feel nice and it *didn’t* and I should have known better and–” Everything after that was utterly unintelligible through the sobs as the little terran buried her face in her hands and wept.

“Tsuga.” Cass’s voice sounded as weak as she looked, strained and raspy, but when she lifted her hand and set it on one of Tsuga’s fingers, Tsuga felt as if her core would split in two. Cass looked up at her, eyes still slightly glazed, and she was perhaps the most perfect thing Tsuga had ever seen. No matter the situation, no matter that Aletheia was still crying, Tsuga found herself wishing that this moment could last forever. It was selfish, horribly selfish of her. She had felt the same way when Cass had touched her leg – *let this moment last forever*. A moment in which, for just a short span of time, Tsuga could forget that she could not, would not take Cass as her floret, no matter how much she needed it.

Two such moments, now. This was dangerous.

“Not her fault,” Cass said. “You hear me?” she added, reaching out and seizing a fistful of Aletheia’s skirt to get her attention. “Not your fault. I said yes.”

“But I *made* you,” Aletheia managed to whimper out.

Cass snorted. “Please. Like you could pressure me into anything. I’m a stubborn old bitch.”

“It’s not your responsibility,” Tsuga repeated, reaching out to stroke Aletheia with her free hand. The little terran leaned into the strokes, her sobs catching in her throat. It seemed to calm her, so Tsuga kept the petting up. “I’ll be speaking to Pisca about this, but *none* of this is your responsibility.” If Tsuga was right, very little would be Aletheia’s responsibility before long. *Best to get her used to the idea now.*

“But–” She sniffled and rubbed at her eyes. “But I kissed you, and…”

“We’ll talk about that when I don’t feel like I’ve been hit by a truck, okay?” Cass said. “Don’t go getting your hopes up,” she added, “but we’ll talk, okay?” Aletheia nodded, still sniffling, still leaning into Tsuga’s gentle petting. She really was a very sweet little sophont. Tsuga could absolutely understand why Pisca wanted to keep her.

But that was something else that Tsuga needed to take care of. “Cass, I’m going to go talk to Pisca for a moment, but then I’ll come right back, alright?”

Cass nodded. “Not her fault either, I said yes.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” Tsuga said. “Aletheia, will you keep Cass company for me?” The redhead let out one last sniffle, wiped her eyes, and nodded. “Good girl,” Tsuga said, and the way her face lit up did more to ease Tsuga’s worries about her than anything. “I’ll be right back.”

Arvense’s office was, much unlike the rest of his practice, a homey sort of place, with mosses and creeping vines covering virtually every surface. His desk was perhaps the only dry place in the room. Pisca sat on a stone covered in lichen, every vine and branch she had drooping, her biorhythms slackened and off-kilter – if Tsuga didn’t know this was Pisca, she might not have recognized her. She looked up when the door opened, and when she saw Tsuga, she instantly froze.

“Arvense,” Tsuga said, her voice even, “may I have a moment?”

“Of course,” he said. “I have some tests I can run.” The door shut behind him, leaving the two alone.

“I’m sorry,” Pisca began almost immediately, “I didn’t know that–”

“You’ve rebloomed twice,” Tsuga said, cutting her off. “Once, I know, because you wanted a botanical sample and didn’t evaluate the stability of the cliff if was on before you went to get it. What happened the first time?”

“It’s… really embarrassing,” Pisca said, looking at the floor.

“Tell me.”

“I might have crashed a shuttle trying to fly down a canyon at high speed over a wager,” she said quietly.

“And you were alone in the shuttle, I take it?”

“Well, of course I was, I wouldn’t–”

“Ah,” Tsuga said, interrupting her again. “So, both times, the only person who suffered because of your impulsivity and lack of preparation was you?”

Pisca was silent for a long moment. “I see where you’re going with this,” she finally said. “And yes. You’re right. It was deeply, deeply irresponsible of me, and I feel absolutely horrible.”

“Good. You should,” Tsuga said, sitting down on a stone opposite Pisca. “Because this is how we learn. I am *extremely* angry with you right now, Pisca. It’s one thing to be careless with yourself, but quite another to be careless with a xenosophont – and if you intend to keep little Aletheia, that’s a lesson you absolutely *must* internalize, right here and right now.”

Pisca nodded. “I know, I know, I should have checked, I shouldn’t have assumed Cass was a baseline terran–”

“It’s not just about this one instance, Pisca,” Tsuga said firmly. “It’s about your responsibility to xenosophonts under your supervision. You’re young, and you haven’t had much opportunity to participate in our common task. Over time, this will become more and more natural to you. But until it does, you must be *intentional* with your care. You must plan, and plan again, and remember that even when the unexpected occurs it is *your responsibility* to take care of whatever arises. When you had that grafted,” she said, nodding to the bright orange blossom, “you should have grafted the counteragent as well. I will say this: you did well to bring Cass here. That was the right thing to do.”

“When she started screaming– well, what else *could* I do?” The thought of Cass screaming was like a blade in Tsuga’s core; heat roiled up inside, but she kept herself calm. “Everyone always makes it look so effortless,” Pisca said.

“Well, it’s not,” Tsuga said. “But it does get easier with experience.”

“I suppose,” Pisca muttered. “… but you’ve never had a floret, have you?”

Heat was doused with frosty cold that ran in slivers throughout Tsuga’s vines. “No,” she said, “but I have cared for xenosophonts briefly, and I have learned a great deal from friends and colleagues just by watching them with their florets.” Tsuga knew what being a good owner meant, what qualities it took, and while she knew she lacked them entirely, that didn’t mean she couldn’t help someone else develop them. “You mean to keep Aletheia.” It was not a question.

Pisca nodded, her branches perking up just a little at the mention of her. “She’s so… sweet, and so gentle, and…and I can’t believe I found her in that miserable frozen little hole in the ground. She’s too good to have come from somewhere so horrible. I want her to be warm every day, and I want her to be able to eat hamburgers whenever she wants, and I want to hold her close so she’s never, ever alone, and I want to help her make her body feel right, and–”

“I know,” Tsuga said, reaching out and intertwining a few of her vines with Pisca’s. “I know.” Tsuga wanted the same thing, after all – the gesture was as much to comfort herself as to comfort Pisca. She wanted to keep Cass, wanted her warm and safe and satiated, all her old injuries mended, all her worries banished forever. She wanted to learn to make shakshouka and fesenjoon and baklava and everything else Cass had talked to her about, and more besides. She even wanted to read all her anarchist philosophers, the better to understand why she was the way she was. Tsuga had known it in her core for a long while, but it wasn’t until she held Cass in her arms and hugged her, had soothed her own ancient aches with the simple pleasure of cuddling a xenosophont, that she could admit to herself how much she longed for it, how much Cass had worked herself beneath her bark.

Not again. Not again. Take her now, before it’s too late.

She could never have Cass. Cass deserved better than her. But if she could help another xenosophont by helping her owner become the sort of Affini she needed to be – if she could, by proxy, make a xenosophont happy – maybe that would be enough. “Promise me,” she said, “that you will take this and learn from it. If you can do that, I won’t carry a grudge.”

Pisca nodded. “You’ll still be my mentor?”

“Pisca, if I uprooted a student the first time they made a serious mistake, I would have no students,” Tsuga responded. “Of course I’m still your mentor. I did plenty of foolish things when I was your age, too.” Nothing nearly *so* foolish, but Pisca didn’t need to hear that – what she needed was to know that she could stop doing foolish things.

Pisca’s vines tightened around Tsuga’s, and an enormous weight seemed to come off her shoulders. “Thank you. I’m so sorry.”

“I know you are,” Tsuga said softly. “Remember that feeling, and you’ll do just fine by Aletheia. Now, take a moment to compose yourself. When you feel ready, you can go pick her up, take her home, and cuddle her all you want. I’ll stay here with Cass.”

“Alright, here we are,” Tsuga said as she set Cass down gently on the bed. “Is there anything you need before I give you the Class-Z? Another glass of water? Something to cuddle?”

Cass shook her head. “No, m’fine,” she mumbled. Even without the Class-Z, she was clearly exhausted from her ordeal, and would probably sleep for a good long while on her own, but Arvense had insisted on the Class-Z to ensure a healthy rest cycle. He’d given her that as well as a canister of aerosolized Class-E cocktail, in case she had a relapse, but Tsuga didn’t think it would be necessary – Cass was a tough little creature.

“Alright, then,” Tsuga said, lifting the canister of Class-Z and gently fitting the breathing mask to Cass’s face. “I’ll see you in 12 hours, and I’ll have something good to eat waiting for you, alright?” Cass nodded, and Tsuga’s needles rippled with relief. Somehow, after all this, Cass still trusted her on some level. “Deep breaths now, and don’t hold them. Sleep well, little one.” She thumbed the release, and watched as Cass’s eyes slipped shut almost as soon as the thick, wispy gas entered her lungs. She held the mask in place for a moment, then shut down the flow and pulled the blankets up over Cass. She desperately wanted to add *I will never, ever let this happen to you again*, but that wasn’t a promise she could keep.

But she could pretend, for just a few days. Arvense had insisted on bed rest for at least 48 hours following her sleep, and light activity at most for another few days afterwards, depending on how well Cass was recovering. During that time, Tsuga would *have* to care for Cass, provide food for her, help her bathe, everything. For those brief hours, she could pretend that the impossible was possible. *I’ll just be doing the basics*, she told herself. *Nothing fancy. Just simple things any Affini could do, even me. I won’t cause her any harm in so short a time*.

She could manage that, and she could allow herself those private feelings. Just for a few days. She could never *express* those feelings, of course – Cass would never understand, let alone accept, them – but she could allow herself to feel them. *My floret*, she thought as she watched Cass sleep. *Just for a few days*. She’d do better than she had when Cass’s leg was recovering. She hadn’t really known the terran then, hadn’t understood her at all, but now there was a connection between them. Wasn’t there? *Cassandra Sequi, First Floret.* The thought made her dizzy, made her foliage shift like the sun was rising, every needle hungrily steering for nourishing light – and at the same time, a bitter tang in her gustatory nerves.

Not again.

She left, closing the door as quietly as she could, and settled on her sofa. Cass would be sleeping for some time, and she had work to catch up on. The planning meeting for the environmental remediation of Solstice had gone on without her, of course, and she tackled the notes from the meeting first, taking special care to read over those parts that had come after she’d left. Nothing too surprising, but it was good to know what page everyone was on. She began typing up an addendum, both by way of apology for ducking out and to add detail to her abortive explanation of conditions on the planetary surface, when she received a message.

> <SuspendedDisbelief> Tsuga, I’m on my way to your hab. Please have Cass ready – I need to speak to her.

Why would the Captain need to speak to Cass? she wondered. Quickly, she typed up a reply.

> <UnearthedHope> Cass is asleep. Is something wrong?
> <SuspendedDisbelief> Rather a lot, unfortunately. Can you wake her up, please?
> <UnearthedHope> I’m afraid not. She’s sedated for medical reasons.
> <SuspendedDisbelief> Medical reasons? Everbloom, what’s she done? Never mind, the train’s just pulled up to the transit stop. Tell me when I get there.

It wasn’t long before the front door to Tsuga’s hab slid open and the Captain strode in. “Alright,” e said, “*how* sedated? How soon can I talk to her?”

“Twelve hours minimum, probably longer,” Tsuga said. “She had a bad reaction to Class-A because of her tactile hypersensitivity. Even after she’s awake, she’s not supposed to do anything strenuous for several days. What happened? Why is it so important you talk to her?” *It could be anything,* Tsuga thought, her mind spinning off countless ways everything could go wrong. The awful little bunker Cass had been living in could have collapsed. There could have been an infectious disease outbreak. One of her poor little terran friends could have gotten frostbite. The local star might be approaching its hydrogen depletion threshold (this was, admittedly, the least likely possibility).

The Captain sighed – affected a sigh, at least. Eir terran mannerisms really were quite natural-looking. “The terrans have all run away.”

“What?” This was bad, of course, but not nearly so bad as Tsuga had been imagining. Relief mixed with confusion. “What do you mean, ran away?”

“I mean they appear to have, in a coordinated manner, arranged for a series of distractions during a supply shuttle landing, gotten into one of their cute little land vehicles, and driven away up into the mountains. We have a trail, and I’ve scrambled overflight across the entire eastern half of the continent, but I am *extremely* disappointed. They were being so cooperative!”

“I’m surprised as well,” Tsuga said. “At least it’s not that many of them, right? It should be easy to track them down.”

“Ah, see, here’s the ‘fun’ part,” Andoa said, shaking eir head. “May I sit? This may take some time.”

“Of course,” Tsuga said, gesturing to her sofa. “Can I get you some mineralized water?”

“Oh, much appreciated,” e said as e settled in. “Hard as it comes.” A moment later, eir vines dangling in a glass, e went on. “Before they left, the terrans set up an automated transmitter, which broadcast a series of what seem to be aphorisms or quotations followed by a series of numbers. Here, let me play you some of it.” E extracted eir tablet and tapped at it, and soon the audio file began to play.

“…four, nine, four. You were born with wings. Why prefer to crawl through life? Three, nine, nine, three, two, two. I prefer a short life with width to a narrow one with length. Five, seven, four, two, zero, two…”

“Hold on,” Tsuga said as Andoa switched the file off, “that was Nell, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, it was definitely Nell,” Andoa said, stowing the tablet away. “I don’t suppose you can make any sense of that?”

“Well, it’s some kind of code, clearly. There’s no inherent meaning. And, well–” Suddenly, it became very clear to Tsuga why Andoa wanted to talk to Cass. “It does sound an awful lot like the sorts of things Cass says.”

“Precisely,” Andoa said. “And if she can help us find these little runaways, I need to know that as soon as possible. I also need to know if she knew about this ahead of time, but she’s at least already up here where we can keep an eye on her, so that, at least, can wait a bit.” E drained the glass of water and picked it up in eir vines, toying with it idly as the last dregs swirled around its bottom. “And to think, it was all going so smoothly. I was looking forward to a nice, calm, orderly domestication of this planet. It would have been a nice change of pace. Ah well. At least this lot are only running away from us. They’d be much more likely to hurt themselves if they actually tried to fight, like the rest of their species did.”

“Hopefully it stays that way,” Tsuga said, nodding. “I don’t understand why they’d run, though.”

“Feralists are like this, Tsuga,” Andoa said. “I know you don’t have a lot of experience with direct domestication, but let me tell you: sometimes, feralists will do the most counterproductive things imaginable, and they seem to have an endless imagination for precisely how to go about it.” E hesitated, three or four of eir eyes watching the glass, before continuing. “This lot of terran feralists are different from the usual sort, though. It would be a mistake to assume anything about them. Hence, again, why it’s so vital I know everything Cass knows, as soon as possible.”

“Her recovery has to come first,” Tsuga insisted. *I have to protect her*.

“Naturally,” Andoa said soothingly. “I think it’s admirable how much you care for her – which is why it’s a bit odd you haven’t filed a Notice of Intent to Domesticate.”

Tsuga froze. Was she that obvious? That easy to read? “I don’t have any intention of domesticating her,” she said, a little too quickly. “Apart from the fact that she doesn’t want to be domesticated, I don’t believe I have the requisite qualities necessary for long-term care of a floret.”

Not again.

“We both know she’s going to be domesticated,” Andoa said, giving Tsuga a curious stare. “She’s a feralist, Tsuga. It’s for her own good.”

“You yourself said these feralists are different,” Tsuga countered. “She aligns with us on virtually all points except the keeping of florets – and if we can show her that her worldview *doesn’t* conflict with domestication, I think she would adapt herself very quickly to life in the Compact. And,” she added, “since she’s expressed a desire to remain independent, I feel obligated to help her stay that way, if her well-being permits it.”

Andoa regarded Tsuga for a moment, long enough to be uncomfortable. She was just about to say something when Andoa finally leaned forward and said, “She’s got your vines all tied up in knots, hasn’t she?” E rose, setting the glass down gently. “Can I give you a little advice? Xenosophonts much prefer an Affini to take charge. They may not know it when they start out, but they do. Watching them finally *unclench* is one of the most rewarding sights there is. It’s what’s best for them anyway. So, unwork those knots and take charge, eh? And file that Notice of Intent,” e added, “before someone else does.”

Tsuga bristled, her vines coiling up tightly as if she were about to engage in strenuous work. “I’ll let you know when Cass is awake,” she said quietly. “But her well-being comes first.”

“Always, Tsuga,” e said. “Always. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I now have a much more complicated and freeform evacuation to manage. We’re going to have to dig all these little sophonts out of their holes, and all because *someone* got them all riled up.” There was that predatory look again – Tsuga could see it in em so easily. Wherever Nell was, her days as an independent sophont were numbered, and Tsuga agreed that she probably needed it.

But not Cass – Cass was a good girl. She could be reasoned with.

Not again.

She watched Andoa go, watched the door slide shut behind em, and finally allowed herself to relax, if only fractionally. She had work to do if she was going to be ready to care for her floret-for-a-few-days when she woke up.

Take her now before it’s too late.

She had been doing her research, especially when it came to archaic terran measurements. This time, the pancakes would be perfect. And they would have bacon and eggs and toast alongside them. Cass deserved the best, and Tsuga would give it to her. At least, for a few days. Then, Tsuga would do everything in her power to give Cass the one thing she wanted above all else: her independence.

I can’t lose another one like that.

She would do anything for Cass – even if it hurt just to think about it. But no: she pushed the thought away, buried the ache deep. They were thoughts and feelings for later. For now, she could be kind to herself, and pretend. She could let herself feel, and it would harm no one to do it so long as she kept it to herself.

Just for a few days.

Chapter End Notes

Extreme *pine*-ing? She's a conifer? Get it?

Thanks for sticking with me as I navigate my way through the midpoint of the story. We're nearly halfway through the outline! Yay!

Chapter 13: Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

> For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

> In which the inevitable thing occurs, something changes, and the other, also inevitable thing occurs.
> Content warning for: Nikolai. Just.... Nikolai. (Misogyny, toxic masculinity, the whole nine yards. To reiterate: don't be like Nikolai, folks.) Also, guns, explosives, dangerous driving, and a very scary Affini.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Twin Creeks Station wasn't much to look at from the outside – just an old hydroelectric dam straddling a pair of outflows, redirecting one watershed into two, along with a few outbuildings and old portables Osborne-Clark had dropped for workers to use as dormitories while they kept the old thing from falling apart. The garage was just big enough to hide the truck alongside a pair of jeeps, but it was also freezing cold. This high in the mountains, early in the morning, *everything* was freezing cold, and no one was willing to create a thermal hotspot by running a heater. People huddled together in groups, or up against the vehicles as they tried to eke out what little heat they could from the electrical coil keeping the battery warm enough that it didn't lose its charge.

Nikolai stood alone, glaring at one group in particular, who kept glancing furtively back at him. *Stars-damned plantfuckers*, he thought. *Saboteurs, the lot*. He was sure it was their fault they hadn't made it over the pass in time. He didn't know how the fight in the back of the truck had broken out, but once he'd found out about it, he'd pulled over, gotten out, waded in, and dealt out a handful of blackened eyes and bloody noses to the ones he was pretty stars-damned sure were responsible for starting it. After that, Nell had sorted it out – a waste of fucking time, and one that delayed them enough to make False Oaks well out of reach before sunup.

So here they were, shivering on the edge of a frozen lake, hiding from the fucking weeds who were probably hot on their trail by now, using whatever kind of fucked up plant satellites they had to spy on them from orbit, flying around in their creepy silent shuttles. He had no idea how anyone would want to join up with those things, much less betray their fellow terrans over it. He'd checked, after the fight, and none of the plantfuckers had the mark on their neck

that was the inevitable sign of the worm-head – or so pre-revolutionary rumor had gone, anyway. Maybe the weeds had gotten better at hiding it.

“Hey.” Nell tapped him on the shoulder – she must have gotten back from checking the radio repeater. “You didn’t start any shit while I was gone, did you?”

“I didn’t start shit before, either,” he grumbled. “Plantfuckers did.”

“Niko, don’t be an asshole,” Nell said, sighing. “I told you it was complicated. These are our comrades, we owe it to them to help them, not beat them senseless.”

“Whatever,” he spat. They weren’t any comrades of his. “What’s the story?”

“Well, there was traffic from Elysium, Athabaska, Orcas Bay…nothing from Featherstone yet, but the farm belt folks might have taken their repeater antennas down when the plants showed up, so that’s not surprising. So far so good. I think the majority of them will get away from the more easily identifiable settlements. Now we just hope these things can’t track us some way we haven’t thought of.”

“Still think we should be fighting back,” he muttered.

“How dense are you?” she hissed. “Their *shuttles* are bigger than the Accord’s *cruisers!* And that’s not even talking about the super-dreadnaught they have up in orbit! That thing’s *nine kilometers long*, Niko! It’s practically a mobile O’Neill cylinder! And they don’t even think *that’s* anything special!”

“Just because they’ve got fancy ships doesn’t mean they’re bulletproof,” he retorted. “Not to mention they’re *fucking plants*. We get some of the industrial weed killer from the farm belt or out in Elysium, *fftt!*” He drew his thumb across his neck for emphasis. “Dead weeds. Easy as that.” He was shocked the Cosmic Navy hadn’t tried it, but then, there probably wasn’t a lot of agricultural chemicals lying around on warships.

“You want to try to fight an impossibly advanced species of alien plants that dismantled the Accord in *three years* with fucking *herbicide?*” Nell said, no longer bothering to keep her voice low. “Stars, Niko, that’s – I don’t even have *words* for how up-your-own-ass that is!”

“What, you’ve got a better idea?” he said, raising his own voice. “Or are we just gonna run and hide and bury our heads in the sand instead of standing our ground and fighting these fucking things?” Stars-dammit, she was getting mad over this. Perfect fucking timing. She was hot, no doubt about that, but every time she got it in her head that she knew best, this shit happened.

“I am *not* having this ridiculous fucking argument with you, Niko,” Nell said, glaring up at him. “We have a plan, and we’re sticking to it. We are *not* indulging any of your bullshit macho heroics!” She grabbed him by the front of his coat and yanked him close to add, “Don’t forget which of us is in charge here, Niko. Hint: It’s not you.” She let him go and stalked away.

Typical Nell, he thought, brushing off his coat and angrily glaring at everyone in turn until they stopped looking at him. *Lost the argument, immediately pulls rank*. One of these days, when this shit was all over and done with, he was going to have to set her straight. This kind of shit might fly in commie-topia, but back in the real world, this was not how things worked.

He satisfied the burning itch behind his eyes by checking on his carbine for the third time that hour. Still under the seat of the truck, still loaded. He wished he had something bigger, but the commies were put off enough by giving a former guard a gun that he was frankly lucky to have even that. A proper assault rifle, maybe even an LMG – now *that* was the kind of shit that belonged in his hands. He was wasted on this pea shooter. Even Osborne-Clark hadn't let him have that kind of firepower either, of course, but the suits were idiots – they lost to a bunch of communists, for fuck's sake, of course they were. If he'd been in charge, he'd have held things down, the company would have stayed in control of the planet, and he'd be a big damn hero with an equally big damn paycheck coming his way.

"You done with that, or you wanna fondle your gun a little more?" Ugh, just what he needed – Trish was standing beside him, arms crossed.

"What do you want?" He loaded his voice with all the leftover irritation at Nell that he could manage.

"We're loading up one of the jeeps with supplies for Overlook, so we don't have to backtrack later," she said. "Stop moping because Nell told you to shut up and give us a hand."

"Fuck you," he said, stowing the carbine. "I'm not moping. When those weeds come knocking, you'll be glad I was on top of things."

"I cannot even imagine you being on top," Trish said, rolling her eyes. "Get to work – anything with a red X on it goes to Overlook." She turned and walked off, not even bothering to see if he was following.

Bitch, he thought, the itch coming back hotter and more acrid than before. *A little medical training and she thinks she runs the place*. She'd get hers, one of these days. He slammed the door of the truck and took up a position next to the jeep, taking boxes and crates and loading them into the cargo space in the back. It was for the best. If he let the prisoners do it, it'd take twice as long and fit half as much; they were useless at anything that required even a little organization. *Everything's gotta be fucking committees and votes*. No wonder it took them so long to do anything.

He was in the midst of trying to squeeze a box of medical supplies in between an ammo crate with a bunch of warning labels on it and a fuel cell when he heard the popping in the distance. He knew the sound intimately, not just from the uprising but from before, in training and on off-days. *Who the fuck is shooting?* he thought, seconds before the side door slammed open and Nell rushed in, breathing hard and frantically loading shells into her shotgun. "Scatter!" she shouted. "They're here!"

Chaos erupted in the tight space; some froze, others panicked and ran without a destination in mind, and no few started shouting questions. The shots fell off in the distance, and a loud

thumping sound slowly grew louder, along with a horrifying, singsong voice: "***dOn'T rUn, LiTtLe tErRaNs!***" it howled.

"Block off the door!" Nell shouted, shoving a crate across the floor in loud, scraping bursts. "And get ready to drive!"

The handle of the door began to rattle. "***LiTtLe OnEs, WhY dOn'T yOu CoMe OuT oF tHeRe?***" it called. "***wE hAvE a NiCe WaRm sHuTlLe ReAdY tO TaKe YoU uP tO tHe TiLlAnDsIa!~***"

"Fuck off!" Nell shouted, bracing the shotgun against her shoulder and firing into the door – slug rounds, since it only punched a single, tiny hole in the metal door. She racked the pump action and fired a second round through it. There was silence for a moment, save for the ringing in Nikolai's ears. Then, the voice came back.

"***tHaT wAsN'T vErY nIcE, fLoWeR***," it said. "***yOu ShOuLd PuT tHaT dOwN bEfOrE sOmEoNe gEtS hUrT.***" The door rattled again. "***iF yOu'Re NoT gOiNg tO LeT mE iN, cUtIeS, i'M gOinG tO hAvE tO fOrCe tHe dOoR. sTaNd bAcK, oKaY?***" There was a pause, then not only the door, but the entire *wall* shook, dust drifting down from the rafters.

Something landed, stinging, across Nikolai's face. "Wake up, shithead!" Trish said, grabbing him by his coat and pulling him along. "Get in the fucking jeep!" She shoved him into the passenger seat – the dashboard was already warmed up. How had he missed the telltale whine of the capacitors charging? He looked up to find someone else in the driver's seat of his truck, just as Trish shut the door on him.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Get the fuck out of my truck!" Another shotgun blast, then a cluster more from different guns as the wall shook again – cracks were starting to form.

"Nell!" Trish shouted as she climbed into the driver's seat. "Come on!" Nell glanced over, fired another shot, then broke from the firing line.

"Everyone out, now!" she called, jumping up and onto the jeep's running board on the passenger side, holding onto the cargo rack on the roof with one hand. The wall shook again, partially giving way. "Get the door open, go! Go!" Cold air rushed into the garage as the door began to lift, and as the wall gave way completely, crumbling in a dusty avalanche of brickwork and plaster. The massive arm, head, and shoulders of the weed that had smashed the wall in were caked in white, its eyes – too many of them – glowing as it seemed to stare right at Niko in the rearview mirror.

He missed part of what happened next – maybe it all happened too fast, or maybe he took a knock on the head and hadn't noticed. He had a vague sense of shouting, of light pouring in from the slowly opening garage door, something tall and unnatural on the other side. Then, he'd been thrown back in his seat, and there'd been a horrible noise as the truck next to them stopped short, and something raked along the driver's side. Now, there was more shouting as the jeep lurched, as gravity took a short break and something smashed him in the face.

"Wake! Up! You useless asshole!" Trish pulled her free hand back to the wheel and spun it as the jeep careened around a curve in the road. Something banged repeatedly against the

window, and it took Nikolai a long second to realize it was Nell, smashing the butt of her shotgun against it. “Lower the window!”

There wasn’t enough room in Nikolai’s head to keep track of everything that was happening. At some level, as he worked the handle to lower the window, his brain forgot to breathe for a moment. Wind whipped in and slashed at his face, and as soon as it was open enough, Nell dumped the shotgun into the window. “Reload!” she screamed. One leg swung in, and she straddled the door, bracing herself and drawing a pistol. “Keep going!

“Like I’m gonna stop!” Trish shouted back. She veered around another curve, Twin Creeks Station visible once more across the frozen lake. As he fumbled with the shotgun, Nikolai saw the shuttle hovering above it in the rearview mirror, its ventral side coruscating in violets and blues, the massive figures of the weeds moving around the outbuildings. There was a strange sound in the air, almost like singing, but *wrong* somehow. A dark shape was moving across the surface of the lake, and as Nikolai stared he realized it was one of the weeds, but it had *done* something – it didn’t look even a little terran anymore, but like some kind of horrific nightmare bird or dinosaur or *something*, running on two long, stilt-like legs, hunched forward with a long tail out behind it. *Is that what they really look like?* he thought.

“Any time now with the shotgun, Niko,” Nell shouted over the wind, squeezing off a few shots at the thing as it closed on them.

“Huh? Shit!” He fumbled around the cabin for a moment before adding, “Where’s the fucking shells?!”

“Belt.” Another few shots followed before Trish put the jeep into a fishtail to take a curve at speed, drifting around it inches from the guardrail, somehow maintaining control despite the snowy road. Nikolai spotted the ammo pouch at Nell’s side, opened it, and began awkwardly forcing shells one by one into the shotgun’s internal magazine. “I swear these stars-damned things *are* bulletproof!” Nell added, tossing the empty handgun on the console and taking the shotgun from Nikolai. She braced herself, clamping onto the door frame with her thighs, and fired again.

“Nikolai, did you finish loading the jeep?” Trish said. Another swerve, another shot from Nell.

“***sLoW dOwN, LiTtLe OnEs, tHiS iS rEaLlY qUiTe dAnGeRoUs!***” the thing chasing them sang.

“You’re getting on me about that *now?*” Nikolai said.

“Did you load the box with the big fucking EXPLOSIVE warning labels on it?”

“Yes!”

“Then get back there, open it up, and give Nell some fucking grenades!” Comprehension dawned in the back of Nikolai’s mind, and he immediately began scrambling into the backseat and fumbling with the catch on the ammo crate. Inside, nestled in foam, lay little

egg-shaped bombs just waiting to blow a weed to smithereens. Soon, he was passing them to the front seat. “One mile to the bridge!”

“Alright, you weed,” Nell growled, firing one last shot before dropping the shotgun back into the front seat. She took a grenade, pulled the pin, and silently counted “One, two, three,” before throwing it. A few seconds later there was a penetrating *KRMP* from behind that echoed off the mountain a second later. “Yeah, now you’re rethinking this, aren’t you?”

“Did you get it?” Nikolai twisted around, but the thing was still coming.

“***yOu rEalLy sHoUlDn’T pLaY wItH sUcH dAnGeRoUs tHiNgS!***”

“Fuck off, you fucking weed!” Nell screamed, pulling the pin on another grenade, counting off, and throwing it. This time, the explosion was much more on target. “I’ll die before I let one of you things inside my head again!”

“Bridge in twenty!” Trish called.

“Niko, when I count two, pull the pin on one and hand it to me,” Nell said. “Let’s double-up on this fucker and see if we can’t drop the bridge on it!”

“Right!” Nikolai clutched his grenade, watching Nell pull the pin on hers and count off. He yanked on two, and held the live grenade for a terrifying few seconds before Nell took it from it and threw it as well. The jeep roared over the bridge, and the two blasts came one right after the other as the Trish threw the jeep around another curve in the road at an extremely unsafe speed. Nikolai was certain at least two of the wheels had left the surface of the road, and that they would tip and roll down the side of the mountain to their deaths, but a heartbeat later Trish brought it around and kept on driving. “Did we get it?”

“I don’t see it!” Nell said, laughing. “Eat shit, weed! Move over, let me get in, I’m fucking freezing! Trish, get us to Overlook!” Trish flashed a thumbs up, and the three drove off, the sunrise blinding on the snow.

There were no dreams to wake up from where Cass had gone. One moment, peaceful oblivion – the next, the soft embrace of heavy blankets and the dull ache of a body still holding a grudge. She made a soft noise and tried to sit up, but the bone-deep fatigue and the weight of the blankets made it difficult. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and levered them slowly open, the soft light of the room bright until her eyes adjusted. For a moment, she didn’t remember where she was. The wall had a window showing a view of a forest, but not one Cass recognized – nor, for that matter, any plants she recognized. Slowly, memory trickled back. *Tsuga brought me home*, she remembered. She let out a sigh. *You’re letting this become habit, Cass*. *Remember what we said about that?*

If she was in the same room, it had changed. Before, it had just been an empty, featureless storage room, stacked with boxes and a single hammock. Then, Tsuga had moved the boxes out and a bed in. Now, there was a wooden writing desk and a chair to go with it, both of which looked handmade. There was a thick stack of paper in a binder resting atop it. There was a bookcase too, with books – actual *printed* books. Cass had hardly seen any since the

Pillar of Fire, which had taken Archives' tiny collection. Then there was the window, or at least, the screen with such absurd fidelity that if she didn't know she was on a starship, Cass would never be able to tell.

The door slid silently open, and there stood Tsuga. Something was different about her, but Cass couldn't place it – had she reworked her face again? Or maybe her foliage had shifted? But no, the contours were the same, and the needles, branches, and vines all seemed to be in the right place. She filed it away for later.

"Good morning," she said, smiling down at Cass. "Are you feeling a bit better?"

"Well," Cass grunted, "I think I've moved up from feeling like I got hit by a truck to feeling like I got hit by a moped. Does that count?"

"Improvement is improvement," Tsuga said. "Are you hungry?"

Until she'd asked, Cass hadn't thought about it, but the question prompted a wave of hunger as her stomach suddenly tightened. "Extremely. Also, I, uh… I really need to get up and use the toilet." She struggled to lift herself upright again, but before she knew what was happening Tsuga was wrapping vines around her and lifting her up into her arms. "Wh-what are you doing?"

"Carrying you to the bathroom," Tsuga said, already setting out. "Arvense said bed rest, which means you're not getting up and you're certainly not walking. Am I holding you correctly? I spent some of the time you were asleep reading up on how to care for terrans with sensory hypersensitivity."

"It's… it's fine," Cass said. Her vines were lashed tightly around her, but not so tight that they felt constrictive, merely supportive. "I've had worse, though. I can handle this."

"Hush," Tsuga said as the bathroom door slid open. "Just because you've endured hardship before doesn't mean you have to endure it any longer. In fact, it means just the opposite. Here." She gently deposited Cass on the toilet, vines coaxing her into a sitting position. "I expect you'll want privacy, so I'll just leave a single vine in here with you. Tug on it when you're finished, alright?"

"O…kay," Cass said, blinking as Tsuga walked away. *What's going on with her? It's like she's a completely different person*. Her eyes stayed fixed on the vine, and when she was finished, she tugged on it like Tsuga had said, feeling incredibly foolish. The way her legs ached, she wasn't entirely sure she *could* stand up on her own, at least not yet.

When Tsuga returned, just like before, she didn't hesitate, but instantly wrapped Cass in vines and hoisted her up in to her arms. "Now, let's get some food in you, and then once we've settled your stomach, we can come back in here for a bath."

Screw it. She could be blunt with Tsuga. "Okay, what's going on?"

"Nothing is 'going on,'" she replied as she carried Cass back to the bedroom. "Apart from me caring for you while you're unable to do so for yourself." She gently set Cass back down in

bed, this time in a seated position, and pulled the covers back up over her legs. The vines slackened. “Now, just wait right there while I get your breakfast.”

“We could just eat at the table, you know.”

“Arvense said *bed rest*,” Tsuga said, her voice firm. “So you’re staying in bed. No arguments.”

Cass let out a sigh and relaxed against the headboard – against the pillows that Tsuga had stacked there without her even noticing, that is. *Something must have happened while I was out*, she thought. *But what?* When Tsuga returned, she was carrying a wooden tray with legs at both ends, and the air filled with the sweet and savory scents. There was a plate of pancakes, stacked three high, with a pat of butter melting on top and a drizzle of maple syrup, a pair of eggs over easy, and three rashers of a dark cut of meat that was oddly familiar.

“This is… wow,” Cass said, picking up the fork and knife and cutting a segment of pancake. She chewed thoughtfully – it was good, but it wasn’t the same. It was not the molecule-perfect pancakes Tsuga had given her before. “This isn’t the same recipe you compiled,” she said.

“I didn’t compile those,” Tsuga said. “I made them.”

Cass paused with another piece of pancake hanging in midair on her fork. “You *made* these? After what happened last time?”

“I practiced more. And studied archaic terran measurements to better understand the process of cooking. I tried to make the eggs sunny-side up, as that seemed traditional, but I couldn’t quite get it right. I hope these are acceptable.”

“I’m sure they’re fine,” Cass said, using a fork to cut into one. Soft, melty yolk began to dribble out, and the taste was heavenly. “Tsuga, this is amazing. Is this…” She picked up a piece of the not-quite-bacon and took a bite, and sense-memory flooded back. “This is halal bacon. I haven’t had this in decades!”

“Well, I studied your file,” Tsuga said, crouching down and smiling. “And it said you belonged to a terran religion with dietary requirements, so I looked those up, and it said no pork, so I double-checked everything, and it turns out bacon is pork. Why is bacon pork? And it turns out *ham* is also pork. I think it’s very confusing.”

“It’s delicious,” Cass said, unable to keep the smile from her face. “Thank you. It’s…not something I worry about a lot. Not something I *could* worry about on Solstice, anyway. You ate what they gave you, or you didn’t eat. But this honestly– it means a lot to me. The thought, I mean. And it reminds me of home.” She looked up at Tsuga. “So, thank you.”

Something in the color of Tsuga’s eyes shifted, a warm hue of gold spilling out into the green. “It was my pleasure,” she said softly. “And you deserve it.”

Something was wrong.

It wasn't the sofa. The sofa was perfect, enormous, more than enough for Aletheia to stretch out on, soft enough to be comfortable but firm enough to hold her weight. It wasn't the plushie she was cuddling, either. Much like everything else, the Affini seemed to have perfected plushie science – it was exactly as fuzzy, as soft, and as firm as it needed to be for maximum huggability. Aletheia had never seen a beeple, but if they were even half as cute as this plushie, she knew she'd love them. It wasn't the dress Pisca had put her in that morning, or the french toast she'd cooked for her, or the ancient Information Age cartoon about some mythical creature called a pony that she was watching. All of that was perfect too.

(Her body, okay, sure, not perfect. Not even close. But that was a work in progress, so that didn't count.)

No. Something was wrong, and it was Pisca. She had made breakfast for Aletheia, and helped her wash her hair, and picked out a really cute sundress for her to wear, and given her the plushie, and had picked her up and carried her to the couch, and even stroked her while she watched the cartoon, but something about it all had felt *distant*. Even now, Pisca was looking over some document or another on her tablet, one hand idly resting on Aletheia. She didn't even have a vine wrapped around her, and she was as sober as sober got. Class-As were a new thing for her, but she really, *really* liked them – the orientation chat had not been wrong. Granted, she understood why Pisca might not want to dose her up right now, but it was just one more thing on top of everything else.

She sat there through three episodes of the pony cartoon, leaning up against Pisca, before she finally worked up the courage to act. She crawled into Pisca's lap, leaning up against her trunk and reaching out to clutch one of her vines. *Let's see her ignore something* this *cute*, she thought. And indeed, Pisca did pause, look down, and smile. She lifted her hand, stroked Aletheia's hair a few times, then gently laid the hand on her shoulder held her close. Aletheia sat there for a moment, waiting for more, but it never came.

That does it. She squirmed to her feet and looked Pisca square in the face. "What's wrong?" she said.

"Hmm?" Pisca set the tablet down. "Nothing's wrong, little one. Why?"

"You're just…different," Aletheia said. "If you're busy with work or something, I understand, but– it just feels like you're holding me at arm's length. I know yesterday was bad. It was bad for me too. But that doesn't change what we talked about. I still want this."

Pisca's eyes shifted, and one of her needly antennae brushed Aletheia's cheek gently. "I know you do, petal. And I do too. But after yesterday, I feel like I need to– well, I need to rethink my approach. I need to be more careful, more intentional. I don't want what happened yesterday to ever happen again. Especially not to you."

"I trust you," Aletheia said. *Stars, her eyes are so pretty*, she thought, sighing gently and staring into them.

"I know," Pisca repeated. "But I have a tendency to get carried away, and I let that tendency hurt Cass. I have to be better. And I don't know how long that will take."

Aletheia froze, her reverie doused with a chill. “You’d better not be trying to get rid of me,” she said.

“Not get rid of you,” she said. “But I worry that you might be better off with another Affini. One who’s more mature. Who won’t get carried away with you.”

“But I *like* it when you get carried away with me,” Aletheia said, squeezing the plushie tight and pouting. “It makes me feel small, and soft, and good, and–” ” She sniffled and buried her face in the plush beeple. “And the last few days with you have been the happiest I’ve ever been.” There was an ache in her heart, and she felt as if she might burst into tears at any moment – she’d become such a crier since she was put on Class-Gs. “I don’t want it to stop.”

“It won’t,” Pisca said, stroking Aletheia soothingly. “Whoever you end up with will make you just as happy.”

Aletheia shook her head fiercely. “No, they won’t, because they won’t be you.”

“Aletheia–”

“You were the one who helped me tell Arvense I wanted Class-Gs,” she said, looking back up at Pisca. Her eyes were wet. The waterworks were sure to start any second. “You made me feel safe, and you always gave me special attention whenever you came by the hab, and you helped me pick out cute dresses and you even helped me pick out my *name*.” She sniffled again, louder. “I want *you*. And I know you’re scared but even if something does go wrong I won’t be angry with you, because I know you’ll fix it. I trust *you*.”

Pisca was silent for a long moment, but she never once stopped stroking Aletheia. “You’re certain about this?” she said quietly. Aletheia nodded, rubbing away the tears that were welling up in her eyes. She felt vines snaking around her ankles, around her waist. “Even after yesterday, you still want to be my floret?”

“Always,” Aletheia whispered, leaning forward and letting Pisca catch her and squeeze her tight against her trunk. “I belong here.”

“To me,” Pisca said. Her vines tightened around Aletheia, gentle but insistent.

“To you,” Aletheia replied, gasping softly as more vines joined the first few. She blinked her tears away and gazed up into Pisca’s impossibly deep eyes. *So pretty*.

“Then I suppose I’ll have to get better at this a little more quickly than I’d planned.” There was something welling up in Pisca’s eyes, too, as she brushed a lock of hair out of Aletheia’s eyes and stroked her cheek with a thumb. There was a need there that matched Aletheia’s, a hunger perfectly tailored to the longing she’d carried inside her her whole life. She realized that now – it had always been there, the desire to be held, to be cared for, to be kept and loved and to *belong* to someone as utterly as she belonged to Pisca. What a relief it was to have found her perfect complement, the one place in the universe she was, without question, meant to be.

Something delicate and sharp trailed across her exposed shoulder, and though she shivered at the sensation she didn't look away. Slowly, gently, Pisca turned her head to the side, and let her eyes focus instead on the orange-blossomed vine, on the wet little needle at its heart. She gasped just a little, a short intake of breath that halted as she took her lower lip between her teeth, and looked back to Pisca. Pisca said nothing, merely stared, as if waiting for something.

And she was waiting for something, Aletheia realized. *Tell her*, she thought. *Tell her before you get lost in her eyes again*.

"Please," she whispered, her voice catching. The needle came down, a sharp little prick that was washed away by a warm feeling crawling throughout her body. "Aaahh," she moaned, letting her head loll back as she rode the high – not as strong as that first time, a more measured and sedate dose, or perhaps Aletheia was simply developing a tolerance. It felt wonderful nevertheless, all the tension and fear banished in a wave of delight. "Thank you," she murmured, looking back up at Pisca.

"Thank you…?" Again, that sense of waiting, that Aletheia had forgotten to do something. *But what?* she thought, washed away by the pools of color in Pisca's eyes. *What does she want me to do?* Pisca smiled, and clearly saw the problem – she saw *everything* in Allie's mind, didn't she? She leaned in and whispered, "You call me Mistress, little flower."

And Aletheia's heart soared. *Of course I do*, she thought, a giggle escaping from her. *Obviously*. She took a deep breath, felt herself fill with air and with love, and whispered back, "Thank you, Mistress."

Chapter End Notes

I set out to write a small action interlude and it ate half the chapter. Action scenes: not even once.

Chapter 14: Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

In which two arguments happen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"…the party of the first part, hereafter referred to as 'adorable little cuties…'" Cass sighed and scratched a note that simply read "Terrans, again," in the margin. Half of the treaty was the sort of legalese she ran into all the time when she'd worked in Archives, but the other half was this kind of nonsense that felt completely out of place. "Just say *terrans* if you mean terrans," she grumbled.

"Is everything alright?" Tsuga was peering into the bedroom from outside. "I heard you muttering something."

Cass grunted an acknowledgement. "Just this ridiculous treaty. This is an important document, isn't it? So why are there so many passages that, as far as I can tell, just boil down to you cooing over how adorable we supposedly are?" She'd been seated at the desk for over an hour now, paging through the document in the big leather-bound binder, trying to make sense of the labyrinthine language of the Human Domestication Treaty.

"Well, I suppose it's because we feel it's important to acknowledge how adorable you are in a documented and legally binding way," Tsuga said, as if this wasn't completely ridiculous.

"At least half of this treaty is boilerplate cute-talk that could be stripped out," Cass continued. "Is it meant to obfuscate what's actually going on by hiding it under a deluge of this stuff?"

"No, we honestly just think you're adorable," Tsuga said, sounding almost confused. "I don't see the problem."

Cass sighed. "Is every treaty like this?"

"More or less." She crossed to the desk in two long steps. "Every species has unique issues that need to be addressed in their respective treaties of course, or if not unique, situational

ones at least. Yours, for example, has the section on capitalism — not every species needs to be told not to do that."

"But they *all* need to be told they're cute?"

"Oh, definitely," Tsuga said. "It's very important."

Cass pinched the bridge of her nose. *Unreal*. "So you're telling me that you've never encountered a species you *don't* think is cute?"

"This language doesn't have a distinction between singular and plural second-person pronouns," she said. "Did you mean me personally, or the Affini as a whole?"

Cass shrugged. It was honestly a good question. "Both, I suppose."

Tsuga seemed to think it over. Halfway through, she made a go at rubbing her chin. "Well, personally, no. Every xeno sophont I've ever encountered has been surpassingly adorable. As for the Affini Compact as a whole, well, I can't speak to that. I suppose it's *possible* that some species, somewhere, might potentially be less than wholly adorable, but I think it's very unlikely."

"So if every species you've ever encountered is cute…doesn't that lower the social value of cuteness? If everyone is cute, isn't it kind of meaningless to say? Functionally, doesn't that make cuteness not a subject worth commenting on?"

"Oh, no," Tsuga said. "Not at all. If anything, it makes it more important, because they might not realize how cute they actually are if we didn't specifically tell them."

Cass stared up at Tsuga. *How the hell is this the species that's conquered multiple galaxies?*

"In any case, it's almost time for lunch," she went on. "Let's try another go at walking with assistance."

"I could do with something to eat," Cass admitted. "And maybe some time away from this will let me clear my head." She braced her hands against the surface of the desk and pushed, grimacing against the strain. Two days in bed had let her heart recover, but her legs were still wrung out and liable to give out under her, as nearly happened with that morning on the way to the bathroom. As she held herself there, Tsuga's vines coiled around her legs, torso, and shoulders, forming a harness that supported a good fraction of her weight. It made it easier to straighten up, to turn, and to walk. *One foot in front of the other*, she told herself as Tsuga led her out. At least her knee didn't hurt anymore.

Lunch, like the past two days, was a sandwich — Tsuga had discovered that these were relatively easy but had wide variety, so she could keep giving Cass something different every day while still maintaining the same general workflow. Today's was turkey and havarti on sourdough with some kind of spicy aioli, onions for crunch, and a single perfectly shaped leaf of lettuce. "You're getting good at these, you know," she said after she finished the first half.

“Perhaps someday soon I’ll tackle something a bit more complicated and traditional,” she said, the warmth in her voice a gentle undertone to her words. “Oh, and your tablet was chirping earlier,” she added, pulling it out of her foliage and handing it off to Cass. “I think you may have messages from a friend.”

“I always have messages from her,” Cass said, smiling and rolling her eyes as she unlocked the mini-tablet and opened up the chat up. Sure enough, the username random_seed was front and center.

<random_seed> Goooooood morning!!!

<random_seed> Cassiiieeeeeeee

<random_seed> Oh no are you sleeping in????

<random_seed> No morning cassie for leahs???? ;_;

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> Hi, sorry, I was trying to get some work done so I left my tablet in another room.

<random_seed> Cassie!!!! oms everyones so busy lately even Mistress!!! what ru doin???

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> Reading over the Human Domestication Treaty. Strictly speaking, I don’t think it applies to us on Solstice, since we seceded from the Accord, but there might be something useful in there, so it’s worth checking out. Even if half of it by weight is just the Affini talking about how cute we are.

<random_seed> U r cute tho!!!! ur super cute!!!!

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> I don’t think they mean cute in that way.

<random_seed> I was thinkin of goin to cliffs do u wanna come??? or r u still on all day bedtime????

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> I can move around a little, but I think going out is still probably a bit too much. Believe me, I wish I could get up and move around without help. Maybe tomorrow.

<random_seed> Ok!!! im sure Mistress will be busy tomorrow too

<random_seed> Theres so many people comin up from the planet and shes like a super terran specialist so shes got a lot to do to make sure everyone is ok

<random_seed> I love her so much shes so nice!!! ;_;

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> Wait, what do you mean there’s people coming up from the planet?

<random_seed> I dunno thats what Mistress said when she left after breakfast

<random_seed> Shes super busy but she said i could message her if i need her do u want me to????

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> No, I can probably find out on my own. Thank you for telling me, though.

<random_seed> Np of course happy to help!!!! <3 <3 <3

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> One second, I'm going to look into it.

Cass set down the tablet and looked up at Tsuga, who was in the kitchen putting away the various sandwich fixings. "Is there a reason you're keeping things from me?"

She paused. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the fact that my people are being taken off the planet against their wishes." She felt the itch of anger crawling up the back of her neck, hot and prickly.

"Well, you were at the meeting," Tsuga said after a moment's hesitation, "It was agreed that the planet isn't safe for you, so we need to move you off."

"I'm aware," Cass said. "But we have contingencies in place to deal with invaders. There shouldn't be *anyone* being taken off, much less a number big enough to keep Affini busy. Did you know about this?"

"I have been getting welcoming committee updates, yes," Tsuga said. "And helping in whatever small way I can while remaining here to look after you."

"And you kept it from me?" Cass wasn't in the habit of letting her anger leak into her voice, but she felt it more than she had in a long time. *Am I mad because my people are being taken against their will, or because Tsuga lied to me?* she thought. *And why do I even need to ask that?*

"You are recovering from a trauma," Tsuga said gently, crossing around the kitchen counter and crouching down next to Cass. "Part of that recovery includes ensuring you feel minimal stress, and I especially don't want you getting stressed out over something you can't change."

"That's not your concern," Cass said. "If my people are in danger, I need to know!"

"They are *not* in danger," Tsuga said firmly. "They are in far less danger now than they were before. And your well-being *is* my concern, and will always be my top priority." She paused, then added, "Because you are currently in my care," a little too quickly.

Always? A chill ran up Cass's spine. "I'm recovering, yes," she said quietly. "And you're helping me, and I appreciate it. But that doesn't give you leave to make decisions for me, or to decide what's best for me, or to treat me like I'm a pet. I am *not* a floret, I am not *your* floret, I will never *be* a floret. Is that clear?"

Tsuga was silent for a long moment, looking away. "I have no intention of taking you as my floret," she said. "Or taking any florets, for that matter."

“Then stop treating me like I’m incapable of making decisions for myself!” Cass said, slamming her palm on the table. “You’re the only Affini that’s ever treated me like an equal, and that’s *changed* all of a sudden and I don’t know why!”

“If anything has changed,” Tsuga said, “It’s because I don’t want to see you get hurt again.”

“I am not your responsibility!” Cass braced herself against the table and pushed up, getting shakily to her feet — this way, she was almost eye-to-shoulder with Tsuga. Tsuga’s vines immediately leapt forward and began to coil around her. Cass tried to bat them away, but they were far too strong. “Stop that!”

“I am not going to let you fall,” Tsuga said. “You can walk wherever you want, but I will be there with you.”

“I don’t *need* your protection,” Cass hissed. “None of us need your protection! We were fine on our own before you showed up, and now…” She squeezed her eyes shut as they began to burn, tears threatening to well up. “Now you have them and you’ll do to them what you’ve done to McCracken! Brainwash them all, and make them grateful for you conquering them and stealing the freedom we fought and died to secure!”

“You don’t think Aletheia is happier here?”

“Of course she is! You’ve given her something we couldn’t, not yet — but we could have, eventually! And the price you demand for it is…” There was no holding back the tears now. *I’ve failed her, and I’m failing the rest of them.* “I promised I’d keep her safe!”

“She *is* safe,” Tsuga said gently, her vines squeezing Cass in a hug that she desperately tried to squirm out of. “You don’t have to worry about that anymore.”

“Of course I do! You’ve taken everything she could ever be and burned it to ash in front of her, and you’ve got her so turned around she’s probably *thanking* you for it!” All the frustration, all the rage she’d been feeling began to boil over inside her. Tears streamed down her face, and a heavy sob burst from her mouth. Others followed it in a torrent.

“Cass, please,” Tsuga said. “You shouldn’t get so worked up. Your heart might–”

But Cass had no answer, no thought for words or argument. Her mind was slipping into a storm of grief and fury — fury at the Affini for what they were doing, and at herself for failing to stop it. *Lotus, the name: divine, nectarious juice!* The quote rose from within, and she clung to it like a plank of wood in a choppy sea — if she could conjure words, even to herself, she could ride this out. *Which whose tastes, insatiate riots in the sweet repasts, nor other home, no other care intends, but quits his house, his country, and his friends!* Her feet dangled in midair for a moment until she found herself scooped into two enormous arms. A gentle rocking motion soon matched the turbulent storm within, and something pressed itself against her mouth.

“Just breathe,” she heard, as if from a great distance — a foghorn to steer by when the lighthouse was cloaked in obscuring mist. “Just breathe, little one, and relax.” The mist grew thicker, but the foghorn she could fix upon for a short while. Slowly, the sound faded as well,

the mists warm and heavy on her reclining body. Had she been crying? Whatever for? And anyway, it seemed a perfect time to sleep.

<DawnsongCry> Captain? Vella Ruellia, First Bloom. I hope this isn't too much of an interruption, but you asked to be notified if anyone saw a particular terran, and I believe I may have encountered her during the operation at the hydroelectic facility.

<SuspendedDisbelief> Oh? Here, let me send you a picture.

<SuspendedDisbelief sent a file>

<DawnsongCry> Yes, I think that's her! She's very rambunctious, but I'm sure you know that if you're asking for information about her. She shot me several times!

<SuspendedDisbelief> Oh my, yes, very rambunctious. I'm looking forward to taming this one. Do you have her?

<DawnsongCry> Unfortunately, no. She made it to one of the smaller terran vehicles along with two others, and they attempted to escape. I could have caught them eventually, but they were driving in an unsafe way on a very slick road surface. I nearly slipped and fell several times myself. And that was *before* they started throwing explosives out the window at me!

<SuspendedDisbelief> Explosives?

<DawnsongCry> Not very large ones, but given the condition of the mountain, I was worried the shock might set off an avalanche, or that they might drop the explosives inside the vehicle, or that they might lose control of the vehicle while trying to throw the explosives out at me — I thought it best to break off pursuit. That's what they said to do in training, anyway, if the situation was dangerous to the subjects and there wasn't a clean way to resolve it quickly.

<SuspendedDisbelief> You absolutely did the right thing. Satellites will have maintained their track, so we'll give them a little rope before we haul them in. Thank you for letting me know, Vella. How are you holding up?

<DawnsongCry> It is unreasonably cold down here once you're away from the heaters or the thermal wash from the shuttles! I'm probably going to lose a bit of foliage, and I think I might be out of action for a day or so. Still, we got most of the little cuties safely, so it's worth it, even if I couldn't get those three.

<SuspendedDisbelief> Alright. Be sure to take care of yourself.

<DawnsongCry> Will do, Captain!

The building had been a church, once, Nell was pretty sure — it had a few pews left over, and enormous windows that bled heat out into the freezing midmorning air. Like many of the old

Quaker buildings, it had the feel of having been abandoned for a time and then rediscovered. Before the revolution, some of the Elysian anarcho-syndicalists had used it as a depot for nonperishables, arms, and other essentials that had become critical goods when the revolution finally came.

All that was gone now, shuffled elsewhere. Overlook was a repeater station now, little more than an antenna mounted to the top of the steeple that received and rebroadcast radio signals, part of an array that straddled the mountains. It had served its purpose, and already the small crew that kept the place running were packing up and getting ready to leave.

"And no one else got out?" Deakin said, pouring himself another cup of tea from the kettle over the kerosene camp stove. Even without his overcoat to give him added bulk, he was a broad fellow, his thick and bushy beard going gray at the edges.

"Some might have," Nell said. She was holding on to a cup herself, trying to will the heat from it into her fingers, still ice cold from the wind and snow during the chase. "I don't know. The truck didn't, and I don't think the other jeep did either, so if anyone did escape, they'll be coming overland."

"Well, someone's gotta stay behind for them, then. Supply, assist, and move on with them."

"That'll be dangerous," Raeburn said, her voice froggy until she cleared her throat. "Between the repeater and the raid at Twin Creeks. They'll hit here and False Oaks next, for sure." She wasn't looking well, Nell thought, but then, she hadn't looked great before, thin almost to the point of gauntness even before whatever illness she had had joined the fray. She wore her overcoat inside and still looked cold.

"Someone can set up out at Peake's Cave with a set of binocs and keep an eye on the place," Deakin said. "Should be enough distance to keep the plants off of us, right?"

"That's, what, about a kilometer and a half?" Nell asked. When Deakin nodded, she added, "Well, maybe. We don't know their capabilities, but if they don't have at minimum a satellite observation network at this point, I'd be shocked. They can make anything they want just like that." She snapped her fingers. "Just like that. Stars, if we could just get our hands on one of those compilers…"

"So we should stay under cover as much as possible?" Raeburn said.

"And use IR baffling when you do set up," Nell continued. "In this cold any kind of heater open to the sky will stand out like a spotlight, for sure."

"Just like the good ol' days of the revolution, eh?" Deakin said, raising his cup. Nell and Raeburn matched the toast, and all three drank. It wasn't anything but some heavily steeped local herbs and roots, but it felt good to have something hot in her belly. "What about counter-action?"

Nell shook her head. "No dice. Cass said not to fight back, and I hate to say I agree. These things…they do the impossible, and they make it look easy. She said they could probably

blow the whole planet up if they wanted, and I have to say, just based on the sheer level of logistics they have going on, she's probably right."

The other two were silent for a moment. "Well, shit," Deakin said.

"I think they might be bulletproof, too," Nell went on. "At least, against small arms. I put twelve rounds from a .45 and six 12-gauge slugs into one of those things when it was chasing us, and it didn't slow it down at all. We had to use grenades to get it off us — that's why you got less than was planned."

"Fuck me," Raeburn gurgled, coughing.

"Not exactly promising," Deakin said, nodding. "So, what, we just hide and hope they get bored?"

"We don't exactly have many other options," Nell said. "Maybe we can work some light sabotage, but that's a dangerous game. It's bad enough they're bulletproof, these things can get inside your head, screw with your mind. Anyone who gets captured represents a massive security breach. Bulwark, at least, we kept isolated from operations at other sites, but Cass is still up there, and she knows a lot. Sooner or later, if they haven't already…"

She hated to think about it. She and Cass might have butted heads constantly over ideology, but in the thick of things she was as committed a revolutionary as any Marxist she'd ever seen, and a leader able to get different strains of socialists, communists, and anarchists to work together towards a common goal. She was scarily smart and kept a truly ridiculous amount of operational detail in her head, even if she saturated it with useless quotes and trivia. That, at least, provoked a rueful smile — if the fucking weeds did try to crack into her head, they'd get just as much cruft as solid intel, and good luck sorting it out.

Cass was probably the only anarchist Nell could unreservedly call a friend as well as a comrade, and now she was trapped in orbit on a nine-kilometer-long starship full of mind-breaking alien weeds. The ache in her gut deepened.

"Hey." Nell felt a hand on her shoulder, and turned. Trish was standing there, still bundled up and red-cheeked from the chill. "Unloading's done. Thought you'd want to know."

"Good, good. Sit, warm up."

"Have some tea," Deakin said. "It'll do you good."

"You are a lifesaver, my friend," Trish said, grinning and pouring herself a cup, sipping it carefully. "Oh, stars, that's good."

"Something else I need to tell you," Nell said. "If anyone *does* show up, check the back of their neck for a scar. They have–" She bit her lip. *Don't you fucking say it, you big green bastard*. "They can put something back there that lets them control you." There. No ice down the back of her neck, no booming alien voice in her head. "So, anyone who shows up out of nowhere, you check them."

“This is starting to sound like some bad horror movie cooked up by an algorithm,” Deakin muttered after a moment’s silence.

“Yeah, but it’s real,” Nell said, “so we have to deal with it. And step one is not doing the stupid thing like the idiots in those movies always do, like letting the guy with the mummy bite into their shelter.”

“Fair enough,” Deakin admitted. “You want to ride with us? There’ll be room at our hideout.”

“I’m going to stick you with Nikolai — and I apologize in advance for that — but Trish and I have things we need to do. If Cass is compromised, so are a lot of shelters, and not all of them will have receivers, so they won’t have gotten the coded message I sent out warning them about that. We need to update our tactics, anyway. There wasn’t any set code for ‘alien weeds that can scramble your brains,’ you know? Do you have a spare overland kit? We’re going to need to split up.”

“We can manage one, I think,” Raeburn said. “Should be in the back, still.”

“Alright. You sit and warm up some more,” Nell said to Trish as she stood up. “I’ll get the kit loaded. We should be out of here as soon as we can. Just because we were under tree cover for most of the drive here doesn’t mean they won’t find us eventually.”

The kit was where Raeburn had said it would be, leaning against the wall: a large hiking backpack along with a pair of cross-country skis and poles, one of several in an otherwise mostly empty storeroom. She shouldered the load — heavy, but well balanced — and lugged it out to the carport, where both the Overlook’s truck and their jeep was waiting. The rest of the Overlook crew was at their truck, putting the finishing touches on the load and getting ready to evacuate; Niko, meanwhile, was leaning up against the jeep, looking surly.

“Good, you’re finally done in there,” he said when he noticed her. “Now we can start planning. I figure we take those grenades back, along with–“

“Stop talking,” Nell said, glaring up at him. She opened the back of the jeep and dumped the overland kit inside.

“….what?” He seemed genuinely befuddled, but then, Nell reflected, this was hardly unusual.

“Stop. Talking. As in shut your fucking mouth for once and *actually listen*.” She slammed the door and turned to face him. “You and I are done. Finished. Over. And I mean it this time.”

“What?” he repeated. “Nell, what are you–“

“I said *shut up*. I can’t fucking believe you. First, you pull over and pick a fight with half a dozen of our comrades because you hear arguing from the back — you damn near break Forsythe’s jaw because, what, he’s a plantfucker? Niko, these are our *comrades*. It is not their fault the weeds got in their heads! That’s what they *do*.”

“You’re mad because I smacked some sense into some fucking traitors?!”

“I’m *mad* because you wasted so much fucking time being a violent shithead that we couldn’t get to False Oaks before sunup, which meant we had to hunker down at Twin Creeks which is *not thermally baffled*, which is absolutely how they *found us*, you selfish prick! Everyone who got caught, every single one of them, is getting their brains scrambled right now because of *you*, Niko!” She realized, on some level, that the Overlook crew had stopped their work and were staring at her and Nikolai, but right now she was too mad to care.

“Bullshit! If they weren’t so fucking weak–”

“And *then*, on top of that,” she went on, shouting over him, “*stars*, Niko, I’ve held some greenhorn-ass hands through fights before, but I have *never* seen someone freeze up that hard!” She jabbed a finger into his chest. “I thought you were a big hot-shot guard, huh? How many engagements did you say you fought in the revolution before you got captured, Niko? How many? Sixteen, you said? *Bull. Shit*.”

He fumbled for words, and she let him. *Stars, why did I ever sleep with this oaf?* she thought. “You don’t– you don’t fucking know what you’re talking about!” he finally stammered out. “I’m a fucking professional!”

“Professional waste of *my time*,” Nell said. “You’re going with the Overlook team, and you’re going to do what they say, and you’re going to keep your head down and fucking *behave*, because if I hear about anything like this *ever again*, Niko, I don’t care if I have to ski across the entire Elysium Valley, up and down the fucking mountains, and then clear out to fucking Featherstone, I will *end* you. Am I perfectly fucking clear? Yes, or no?”

He’d gone red in the face by now, and his hands were curling into fists. For a moment, Nell thought he might actually try to hit her, but instead he just muttered something inaudible under his breath and stalked off. “The fuck are you fairies looking at?!” he screamed at the Overlook crew as he passed them.

Nell let out the breath she’d been holding. *Should have ripped that bandage off a long time ago*, she thought. *Might have saved a few lives*. But it was no good lingering on recriminations. She had work to do. She took another deep breath, let it out in a cloud of condensation, and turned to walk back to the old church to get Trish — but she was already standing there, waiting, a big smile on her face.

“You know, I don’t know what you ever saw in that shithead, but *damn*, I know what he saw in you now, because I don’t think I’ve *ever* been that turned on,” she said.

“Yeah, well, still straight,” Nell said. *Unfortunately*, she thought. Half the men at Bulwark were either nerds like Forsythe or wimps like McCracken, and the rest were taken. It’d be so much easier if she *was* into women.

“Sorry,” Trish said, still smiling. “Didn’t mean to be a creep or anything, but *shit*. Watching him shrivel felt good.”

“You’re fine, don’t worry about it,” Nell said, shaking her head. “You ready to head out? I figure we take the road as far as the Hairpins, then you take the overland kit and head for Goldman Commune. You might be able to make it before nightfall if we leave soon.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Trish said, holding up one hand. “I thought I was taking the jeep and heading for Foster.”

“Change of plans,” Nell replied. “That was before they hit us at Twin Creeks. They know this jeep and they’re gonna be looking for it, and going down the Hairpins leaves us too exposed to satellite observation. After I drop you off, I’ll double back, go down the highland road, and ditch it at Grimké. That’ll let me stay mostly under forest cover.”

“You’re painting a huge target on your back, driving that far,” Trish said. “Nell–“

“This clusterfuck is my responsibility,” Nell said, cutting Trish off. “If I’d moved quicker, if I’d not given Niko so much rope… there’s a million things I could have done better, and now our comrades are up *there*.” She looked skyward, sighing. “And it’s my fault, in the end, because I didn’t do enough to keep it from happening.”

Trish looked at Nell for a long moment. “You finally learned how to be exactly as stubborn and self-sacrificing as Cass, I see.”

“Well, she’s not here,” Nell said quietly, “so someone has to.”

“Just be careful, okay?” Trish said, stepping forward and hugging Nell tightly. “I don’t want to lose anyone else.”

“I will,” Nell said, hugging Trish back after a moment’s hesitation. “Come on,” she added. “Let’s get going.”

<UnearthedHope> Captain, I’m sorry, but I think that meeting you wanted might need to move back another day or so. Cass has had something of a relapse.

<SuspendedDisbelief> Is it serious?

<UnearthedHope> I don’t believe so. She found out we’re taking evacuees on board and didn’t take it particularly well. I had to give her some of the Class-E/Z blend Arvense prescribed. I don’t think she did any damage to her circulatory system, but giving her another day to recover might be for the best. I know this affects your timeline, and I’m sorry.

<SuspendedDisbelief> It’ll be alright. Let the poor thing rest. We have a line on her loud little friend. Hopefully, before too long, we’ll have her up here, and then it’ll be much less pressing to get details out of Cass.

<UnearthedHope> I’m glad to hear things are going well on that score, at least.

<SuspendedDisbelief> And how about on the other front, hm? Between you and our little grey-striped girl?

<UnearthedHope> Not particularly well. I think that may have played a role in her relapse, in fact.

<SuspendedDisbelief> The stubborn ones can be like that, and she's certainly the type. Just keep at it, Tsuga. She'll come around eventually. They always do.

<UnearthedHope> I know you encouraged me to be more authoritative, Captain, but I'm not sure she's responding well to that. It may have something to do with her particular ideology of anarchist feralism.

<SuspendedDisbelief> Oh, is that different from the communist feralists? I'll have to take a look at that. I've been doing some light reading and I've almost finished up with this Marx that Polyphylla recommended.

<UnearthedHope> I've read a bit of Berkman but I'm afraid that doesn't make me much of an expert. Learning to cook properly has occupied much of my last few days, anyway.

<SuspendedDisbelief> I never cease to be amazed at how much we can learn from our florets. And these terrans really are marvelous little creatures! Have you heard about turducken yet? It's some kind of ridiculous feast they have, where they put three different kinds of avian inside one another and cook them like that. I very much want to try to make one. It sounds hilariously extravagant.

<UnearthedHope> I haven't tried that, no. It seems a bit above my abilities at the moment.

<SuspendedDisbelief> Well, keep it in mind. It's good to have something to aim for, isn't it? Anyway, please keep me informed about Cass's recovery, and please pass along my well-wishes. I wouldn't want the little cutie to think I've forgotten about her entirely!

<UnearthedHope> I will, Captain. Thank you.

Chapter End Notes

I really need to stop using chatlogs so much, but I can't help it. It's free dialogue!

As always, thanks for reading! Aaaaa, things are happening~!

Chapter 15: Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

> For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

> In which conflicts and misunderstandings are addressed through open and honest conversation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Waking up came in stages — if, indeed, she'd ever truly slept at all. There'd been no dreams, no mid-sleep awakenings, no flirtations with insomnia. Cass had simply floated, adrift in a realm without consciousness or imagery. Slowly, though, consciousness came back, like waves lapping at a sandy beach, tickling her toes and fingers as the sea washed in and out. The wet sand had shaped itself to her body, and extracting herself from its sucking grasp required effort. Slowly, she sat up, blearily opening her eyes to find herself back in the bedroom, covers still half holding her down. *When did I go back to sleep?*

Cass tried to extract herself further, but her heavy limbs made the work difficult, as did the strange feeling that they weren't quite listening to her, almost like she was underwater and there was far more resistance than there ought to be. She struggled against this bizarre force, against gravity, against forgetfulness, until the door slid open and Tsuga walked in — then, memory at least came rushing back.

"How do you feel?" she asked, kneeling down next to the bed.

"Hhhh…I'm…mad at you?" Finding the words wasn't difficult, but getting her mouth around the words took effort, just as moving her limbs did. "You…you drugged me."

"You were having another panic attack," Tsuga said gently. "I was concerned you'd overstress your heart."

"Not panic," Cass mumbled. "Just… meltdown." She remembered that vividly now, even if whatever drugs Tsuga had put in her system made her mind evaluate them without the emotional weight she knew the meltdown had carried. She was angry with Tsuga, yes. This was a fact, much like the fact that she was going gray, or that her hacked birth-control

implant itched. “What is this?” she said, waving her hand around in front of her. “Feels weird.”

“You’re probably still feeling the effects of the Class-E xenodrugs in the inhaler I used on you,” Tsuga explained. “It’s for eliminating anxiety. Unfortunately, all the varieties we currently know to be safe for terran use have side effects. Are you feeling uncoordinated?”

“Very. Don’t like it.” She struggled to push herself back against the headboard — the support would make this easier. Make her less wobbly. “Still mad.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Tsuga said. “But after what happened to you, I couldn’t let you stay worked up like that. Arvense specifically said no excitement–“

“Not about that,” Cass interrupted, rubbing at her eyes with one hand. “You lied to me. And you stopped treating me like a person.”

“You are recovering from a very stressful event,” Tsuga said. “Naturally, how I treat you while you recover will change. I do not think a terran would have plied you with what you consider to be bad news either.”

“A terran wouldn’t be trying to make a pet out of me,” Cass grumbled. Maybe the Class-E was wearing off, or maybe she was just learning how to think around it. Or maybe the subject just made her angry enough to push through it.

“I told you,” Tsuga said, “I have no intention of doing that.”

“Bullshit.” Cass glared up at her. “You’re a terrible liar, Tsuga.” Being upright definitely helped clear her head.

“I’m not lying,” she insisted gently, looking away into the corner.

“You have no intention of making me your floret?”

“Correct.”

“But you *want to*. Because otherwise, why would you treat me like this? Why would you, all of a sudden, go from what we had to whatever *this* is?” She gestured between the two of them. “It’s not just I got dosed with the wrong drugs and had a panic attack. You didn’t do this when my leg was messed up. On some level, even if you aren’t willing to admit it, you *want* this. You want me to be your floret.”

Tsuga’s needles all stood on end, rippling like a storm had suddenly begun to blow through the room. Slowly, she calmed them, and seemed to take a deep breath and let it out slowly. It was the most terran she had ever managed to look. “Yes,” she said quietly. “I do want that. But it won’t happen. It never would have.”

“Then why are you acting this way?” Cass finally managed to kick the blankets away. Tsuga hadn’t undressed her, so she was still wearing the same slacks from before. Whenever that was. *How long was I out?*

“I have been…pretending,” she said, still unable to look back at Cass.

“*Pretending?*”

“Just for a few days,” she added quickly. “It was…this is the closest I will probably ever come to owning a floret, Cass. I wanted to pretend it was real. It was selfish of me, and I got carried away, and I’m sorry.”

The Class-Es must have been slackening their hold on Cass’s neurology, because she felt like someone had dumped ice down the back of her neck, the skin going taut and clammy. “This whole time,” she said, her voice not quite catching, “I’ve had you down as opposed to this whole asinine idea of domesticating terrans.”

“What?” Tsuga turned her head to stare at Cass. “No! Domestication is an unalloyed good for every species we have ever encountered, Cass, both in the societal and in the individual sense. I know your ideological background makes it difficult for you to accept, but we have a great deal of proof to the contrary.”

My ideological background?! The Class-Es were definitely giving up the ghost, because those words took the taut skin around her neck and shoulders and sank their teeth into them — her muscles clenched and held on for dear life. “So you’re telling me that you absolutely, totally, one-hundred-percent agree with this bullshit? Then why no florets? You’re two thousand years old, that’s plenty of time. Why not have the courage of your convictions, Tsuga?!”

“Because you are all so fragile and I cannot understand why this doesn’t bother anyone else!” Tsuga thundered, rising to her feet and pacing around the room. All the anger was driven from Cass and replaced by a kind of awed fear — Tsuga was holding nothing back, letting herself fill the space as much as she wanted, larger and more looming than Cass had ever seen her before, four and a half meters, maybe even five. It was as beautiful as it was terrifying. “Every time I learn about a new sophont species I learn about all the myriad ways you can simply *break*! Take terrans, for example! Your circulatory system is a nightmare! And your combination airway/digestive tract? How you choke to death so infrequently is an utter mystery to me! And let’s not talk about your immune system, which seems to be the only thing that wants to kill you as much as you want to kill each other!”

”Tsuga–“

“It’s not just terrans, either! What about rinans? They’re so small and sweet but what if you loose track of them and they get underfoot?! Spectrum jellies? What if you hug them too hard and rupture their swim bladder?” She made the chainsaw-cricket noise again, much louder this time, and Cass winced. “Their biosphere’s hereditary molecule is so flexible that frankly it’s a minor miracle that their species persisted long enough to employ teratogenic biological weapons at all!” She stopped, her needles all standing on end and vibrating.

“Look, Tsuga,” Cass said, after giving her a moment of silence, “I’m sorry I yelled, okay? And… I know working in archaeology was a *lot*, but–“

“This isn’t about xenoarchaeology,” Tsuga hissed. “Being confronted with how fragile you all are didn’t *help*, but I have *always* felt this way. Every time I realize something bad *can* happen, it’s like I have to stop and figure out all the ways that something bad *might* happen, iterating endlessly. And I always, always find worse things than I think I’ll find when I start out. And when it comes to the thought of caring for a floret…” She shuddered, nearly coming apart. “All I can think of is the myriad ways I could make a mistake and cause instantly-fatal harm.”

“…you spiral?” It was a familiar enough feeling for Cass, but she would never have credited the enormous alien tree with the same kind of insecurity.

“It made me very *good* at xenoarchaeology, mind you,” she added, seemingly ignoring Cass. “*Very* good. And it serves me well enough in planetology. Planets have all *kinds* of ways they can go wrong.”

“Tsuga, have you ever talked to anyone about this?” Cass was starting to realize that her evaluation of Tsuga had been completely wrong from the get-go — that her treatment of Cass as something approaching an equal was more a result of stand-offish anxiety than anything ideological — but that didn’t mean she wasn’t concerned about her. Regardless of her reasons, she’d still been better to Cass than any of the other Affini. “Like, to get some help?”

“I am an *Affini*,” Tsuga said bitterly. “I help others. I am not supposed to *need help*. So no, I haven’t. It’s bad enough they think I’m broken for not taking florets, I don’t need them realizing just how *broken* I really am!” She paused again, and finally looked down at Cass. “I… oh. I’m… I’m sorry, I’m probably frightening you, aren’t I?” She let out an audible sigh and began compressing herself back down into her usual, merely gigantic shape.

“I mean, less frightening, more stunned?” Cass said. “I just– you know, you come off like someone who’s really on top of shit.”

“Yes, I do my best to cultivate that appearance,” Tsuga said. “Sometimes I even fool myself into *actually* being on top of shit.” Cass couldn’t suppress a snicker, which drew a confused look from Tsuga.

“Sorry,” she said, grinning. “It’s just weird to hear you swear.”

“Well, it’s what you said, so I said it,” Tsuga replied, shrugging. “And I am entirely too unsettled to care about propriety right now. Shit, fuck, fuck, ass, fuck, shit.”

Oh no. Cass laughed. “No, stop, that’s too silly.”

Tsuga smiled and knelt down next to the bed. She was getting better at that — even the razor-sharp thorns she had for teeth weren’t quite unsettling anymore. “Fuck, ass, shit, fuck.”

“Stop!” Cass protested through her laughter, tears escaping from her eyes as she hugged herself. “You’re gonna ruin it if you keep doing it!”

“Fine,” Tsuga said. “I will only curse when I particularly need to cheer you up.” She watched Cass as she slowly regained control of herself, the laughter subsiding into the occasional

cackle as she wiped her eyes. “Please don’t tell anyone about that,” she finally added. “About my losing control like that. Or about what I said.”

Cass looked up at her, finally managed to take a deep breath. “I spiral too, sometimes. That’s why I melted down. I know what you mean, about people being fragile. For me, it’s more like…there’s so much that could go wrong, so I should do it to make sure it goes right. And if something *does* go wrong, especially something dangerous or really bad, I should be the one to fix it, so no one else has to. Which is why I’m here, instead of freezing my ass off back down there where I probably should be.”

“You shouldn’t have to shoulder that kind of burden,” Tsuga said — but she didn’t immediately insist that the Affini *should*. Progress, maybe? Something *had* passed between them, Cass could feel, with the mutual sharing of vulnerability. Maybe the situation wasn’t completely unsalvageable.

“Maybe I shouldn’t,” Cass replied, “but I do. Because someone has to. Listen, I won’t tell anyone, okay? But only if you go back to treating me like a person. And don’t keep shit from me! I am also a practiced expert at seeming like I’m on top of said shit, okay?”

“Very well,” Tsuga said. “But may I say something that might somewhat irritate you before we consider the agreement in effect?”

Cass gave Tsuga a long look. “I reserve the right to get annoyed, then, if not outright mad.”

“Acceptable,” she said. “I only wanted to say that you were a very good imaginary floret.”

Cass rolled her eyes, but couldn’t help but smile. “Yep, called it. I’m annoyed.”

It was odd how something as simple a preparing for a meeting transformed a space. The day before, this had been the common room of Tsuga’s hab, a place Cass felt, more or less, comfortable in. Once she and Tsuga had ironed out their difficulties, things had more or less returned to normal. More or less: Cass had *not* forgotten the fact that Tsuga had confessed to wanting to domesticate her, and that little burr remained under the surface of every interaction they had. Tsuga was good at hiding it, but Cass could see it emerge now and again, now she knew to look for it. Still, the important thing was that Tsuga wasn’t acting on it. She could moderate her impulses. That made her hab a safer place than anywhere else on the ship.

But the meeting changed that. It was no longer just Tsuga’s hab — it was a battlefield now. No bullets would fly here, no bombs, no tripwires, no directed-energy weapons, but it was here that the fate of her people on Solstice, and those who had been abducted from there, would be decided, and Cass was not coming to battle unprepared. She had pored over the treaty between the Accord and the Affini, the treaty that dissolved the Accord and formally set the Affini over all humanity, and she’d studied the military campaign (not that the Affini called it that, which made it annoying to find records on at first) that had brought it about.

And she knew the Affini, now. They were arrogant, unwilling to compromise, and obsessed with their florets. Their advanced technology made that a dangerous combination, but as

Tsuga had said, they weren't gods — and to Cass, that meant they *could* be beaten. Now, after all her work, she finally had a foundation to build a defense on. All that remained was to join the battle that had begun the moment the Affini had set foot on Solstice.

When the door slid open and Polyphylla and the Captain walked in, Cass stood — not out of respect, per se, but to show that she could, that she wasn't still laid up and easy to walk all over. Another two days of recovery had made her able to get around on her own, but standing up was still a non-trivial effort. "Captain," she said, crossing her arms and standing as steadily as she could.

"Captain," Andoa replied, smiling. It was odd — e was much *better* at smiling than Tsuga was, but somehow it came off as less comforting, more predatory. The captain had the energy of a caged tiger pacing, waiting for those silly bars to stop getting between em and lunch.

"I'm very happy to see you up and about," Polyphylla said, smiling down at Cass. "You gave us all quite a scare, you know."

"I've had worse," Cass said. "So, let me guess, this is about–" She paused as something else pushed its way through the open door of Tsuga's hab. If it was an Affini, it was unlike any Affini Cass had ever seen. It was more tree-like than Tsuga even at her most disassembled, more dynamic than Polyphylla had been when she'd been desperately clinging to a heater on the surface of Solstice. It was a tall cylindrical thicket of vines, stalks, and leaves that lurched along on at least a dozen claw-like roots, like the legs of some algorithmic horror movie insect monster. It had bent halfway to squeeze through the door; once it was through, it straightened, and dozens of thin, spindly limbs slipped out — some held ledgers, others writing implements, yet others seals and stamps of various kinds. Between the thick, bright green stalks, Cass could see individual eyes moving, no two of them looking in the same direction. "What the–"

"Lenta, I think you might be overwhelming our little xeno friend," Polyphylla said gently. "Might you assume a somewhat less busy shape?"

"The clerk has received your request and will comply," the new Affini said. It began to compress and reshape itself, making a more-or-less terran-looking torso for itself. Vines wrapped around clusters of roots to form legs, and its upper limbs consolidated themselves in a like fashion. It still had too many legs, and at least five or six arms that migrated around in an eerily fluid fashion. Its head was less a head than a tripartite series of bark ridges holding several eyes each. It made no effort to shape a mouth. Its voice remained the same oddly harmonious cacophony of tones, like several voices speaking over one another with just a slight delay between them. "Has the clerk achieved a sufficient degree of morphological stasis?"

"Uh." Cass swallowed. "Y-yeah, sure."

"Excellent. The clerk's efficiency should remain minimally disrupted." It scribbled down something in a ledger, stamped it, then closed the ledger and shoved it into the thicket of vines in its chest. "The clerk is Lenta Saccharum, Seventh Bloom. Specified pronouns are they/it."

“Nice to meet you?” Cass said. *Damn. Settle yourself. It’s just a giant alien plant. Not like you’ve never seen one of those before.* Either this was a brilliant ploy by the Captain to unsettle her, or once again the Affini just didn’t grasp that they could be utterly bizarre sometimes. For her own sake, Cass resolved to count it as the latter.

“Lenta is, among its many other roles, the head of our Ad Hoc Office of Terran Adaptation and Assistance for Solstice,” Andoa said. “I thought it might be best to have it present for our meeting.”

“The clerk is pleased to meet the small, adorable xeno,” Lenta said. “It has seen much documentation regarding her. It also assisted in the preparation of the Terran Standard English, Non-Floret translation of the Treaty on Methods, Limitations, and Procedures for Human Domestication, requested by the aforementioned small, adorable xeno. This was a very enjoyable diversion, and the clerk is grateful for the opportunity.”

“Y-yeah, thanks. It was…a lot.” Cass took a deep breath, forced calm on herself. She could get freaked out about Lenta later. “So, let me guess,” she said, turning to the Captain. “This is about your efforts to abduct the entire population of Solstice not going as well as you hoped?” Lenta opened a ledger and began to furiously scribble.

“I would object to the term ‘abduct,’ but otherwise, yes,” Andoa said. “From what we’ve gathered from the little cuties we’ve managed to *rescue*–“ E leaned hard on the word.”–thus far, you’re something of a strategic mastermind for the whole affair. That this plan is all your idea, your design.”

“I can’t claim total credit for it,” Cass said, shrugging. “Others had plenty of input, and local collectives implemented it in their own way — which, for the record, I’m not privy to the details of. No one at Bulwark was in total possession of the facts. The entire point of our collective was to be the canary in the coal mine.” When she got three puzzled looks (and one whatever-the-hell Lenta’s face(s) meant), she sighed and added, “Early warning system.”

“Aaah,” Andoa said. “Well, given what you’ve been through, that makes a certain degree of sense. If your former government was willing to deploy relativistic kinetic strikes, centralized settlement and governance does indeed seem like a poor way to go about things.”

“No kidding,” Cass replied. “Following contact, all collectives are to retreat to shelters designed to conceal their presence. Operations can take several courses from there, but the primary goal is to make any invasion as expensive and time-consuming as possible. You’ve probably already worked that out, but just in case you haven’t, there’s a freebie.”

“Working in the context of the enemy you faced previously,” Andoa said, nodding, “it’s an entirely reasonable strategy. One can’t help but wonder, though, why you feel the need to employ it against us. Shall we sit? This may take some time, and I’m keenly aware that you’re still recovering from a shock to your system.”

“Sit if you like,” Cass said. “I’m fine.” She was not, in fact, fine: her legs were starting to ache. This was preferable to taking Andoa up on eir offer and looking weak because of it, though. Polyphylla and Tsuga did settle in on Tsuga’s sofa, but the Captain remained standing, as did Lenta (though Cass wasn’t sure if sitting was something Lenta was interested

in or even capable of in its current shape). “To answer your question, we’re doing it because you’re unwilling to negotiate.”

“Little one, being unwilling to negotiate away your safety and well-being is *not* the same thing as being unwilling to negotiate,” Andoa said. “There are *many* things we can negotiate about. I’m sure Lenta would be delighted to assist.”

“The clerk would be pleased to offer any assistance required in the drafting of a domestication treaty specific to the terrans of the planet Solstice,” Lenta said with what Cass could only assume was meant to be a cheerful tone.

“But that’s the thing: we don’t want or *need* domestication,” Cass said. “Either in the societal sense *or* the individual sense. We will happily take *assistance*, especially in form of technology — our goals are the same as yours, we talked about this.”

“Yes, communism! I’ve been reading up on that, you know? At once an idea very ahead of its time and yet mired in your pre-spaceflight past. Not just the parts about linen, mind — very much a reaction to your nascent capitalist system.”

“You’re talking about Marxism. I’m not a Marxist, I’m an anarcho-communist. Marxist analysis is a useful tool, but Marxism still ultimately just leads to statism, and statism inevitably degenerates into oppression and tyranny.”

“Aaaaah, might this be the root of your objection to domestication?” Andoa said, grinning eir predator’s grin again. “I read some of your Berkman on Tsuga’s recommendation. Very interesting, but again focused very tightly on the particular conditions of the era it was written in.”

Cass shrugged. “Philosophy builds on the philosophy that came before it. Marx was in dialogue with Kant, who was in dialogue with Locke, and so on down the line. Now we’re in dialogue with them. It’s not their fault they were working with an understanding of the world that didn’t include digital computing or strange-matter manipulation. The core ideas are still valid and carry forward.”

“Well put, well put. For instance, the axiom, ‘from each according to their ability, to each according to their need.’ An admirable position for a terran of the time to arrive at, and one that, I think you’ll agree, describes the Affini Compact rather well.”

“The material conditions of your society vs. the Accord, or vs. what we have on Solstice, are not the issue,” Cass responded. “If it was, I’d have no objections to your proposed evacuation. The issue is that you’re essentially demanding we give you absolute power over us, and answering reasonable concerns with ‘well, just trust us.’ I’ve read the treaty, and while it’s *horrifically* impenetrable and at least three times as long as it needs to be, I was able with no small amount of effort to follow it.” She tapped the heavy binder that lay on her table twice. “I have bookmarks, and I have notes.” Cass heard a soft, high-pitched noise that seemed to come from Polyphylla, but she ignored it.

“I’m not certain the word ‘reasonable’ describes your concerns,” Andoa said. “You seem to envision us as some sort of uncaring tyrants here to trample the proletariat underfoot and

exploit them mercilessly, which is a step up from the sort of thing I'm *used* to hearing out of the mouths of feralist terrans, but still quite far from accurate. Surely you've seen that we're not, I don't know, 'sending you off to the mines' or whatever the popular new accusation is."

"You're forgetting that I've seen you do it," Cass said, glaring up at Andoa. "I was there when you reached into Nell's head and started messing around with her mind!"

"The clerk is unfamiliar with the event in question," Lenta said, eliciting a slight jump from Cass. She'd almost managed to forget it was there, it vanished into the background so readily.

"Cass's comrade, Nell, used a *very* unkind word to refer to florets," Polyphylla said. "At which point the Captain employed a rapid induction to entrance her and insert a very straightforward block to prevent recurrence. It was precise, limited, and non-self-reinforcing. I very much doubt it will have any lasting effect beyond, hopefully, discouraging her from saying that awful word again."

"You call screwing around with someone's free will *limited*?" Cass said, staring at Polyphylla.

"It *was* a fairly restrained correction," Tsuga said. "Though I know it probably doesn't seem that way to you. And while I'm not the expert on terran psychology that Polyphylla is, based on experience with other species I agree that it's unlikely to have any lingering effects on her."

"Unless she's *frightfully* susceptible to hypnosis, I expect the block's already lost most of its oomph," Andoa said. "It's not as if I domesticated her on the spot. *That* will happen later, given what she's been up to down on the surface."

Half a dozen thoughts instantly leapt into Cass's mind, smashing into one another and leaving her brain in total gridlock. After a moment, she regained control of her mouth. "What do you mean?!"

"Apart from running away and sending a transmission that, I suspect, was a coded message inciting others to do the same? That alone would mean we'd need to take a close look at her, but following that, she fired on several members of the rescue team that subsequently located her and even resorted to using explosives in an extremely dangerous way. She's a danger to herself and to others, and when we find her, she's going to be domesticated." E leaned in close. "That's another one of those non-negotiable things, before you complain."

"And that's it?" Cass said, glaring up at em. "No trial, nothing?"

"There'll be an inquest, certainly," Andoa said, "but considering we have clear records of her lobbing grenades out of a moving vehicle, the outcome is rather a foregone conclusion."

"And you wonder why I see you as a tyrant. You're sentencing her to… to personality death for defending herself!"

All the Affini were silent, and for a moment Cass felt a horrible fear that she was next in line for something precise, limited, and non-self-reinforcing. When the Captain knelt down, that

terror redoubled, but when e spoke, eir voice was calm and measured.

“I know that you know that what you just said doesn’t describe florets at all,” e said. “You’ve met quite a few despite spending a good deal of your time on the ship recovering in one way or another.”

“Spying on me, are you?” she spat, somehow managing to quash her fear.

“I’m merely interested to know how you’re getting along, and I ask after you.” E let out a very convincing sigh. “You seem to conceive of domestication as some kind of punishment, when it’s the furthest thing from it. Perhaps it’s unavoidable, given your own experience of being punished for behavior your government deemed undesirable.”

“I’ve met florets who are kept so doped up, they don’t know whether they’re coming or going,” Cass said. her fingernails began to dig into the palms of her hands — when had she clenched them into fists?

“Some florets are very highly medicated, yes, if we determine they need it to be happy. Some are given hypnotic reinforcements and blocks. Some require deep psychological reconstruction work. None of that is personality death. We have xenodrugs that can do that, certainly, but we do *not* employ them liberally. When you see a floret, you are seeing a sophont whose owner is carefully managing their experience of the world, and altering that experience as necessary to ensure the floret’s well-being and self-actualization. It is not a punishment, and it never has been. It is an act of love.”

Cass’s stomach curled up into a tight little ball of dread. “I believe that you believe that,” she said quietly. “Now, you need to believe that I believe that’s all bullshit. You tell yourself that to facilitate what you do. Self-deception is the engine-grease of empire.”

Andoa gave another sigh and shook eir head. “I’m just not getting through to you, am I?”

“Cass, the Captain is telling the truth,” Tsuga said. “None of us wants anything bad to happen to Nell, not even by your definition of ‘bad.’ We just want to ensure she’s not going to hurt herself or anyone else.”

“Everything she did, she did in self-defense against invasion and conquest — which is what this is, no matter how you try to spin it.” *Thanks for all your help, Tsuga*, she grumbled to herself. “We have the right to self-determination, and the right to resist anyone who tries to take it from us. *There’s* our starting point. You said you were willing to negotiate? Let’s negotiate. All our cards on the table: You’re too advanced, too well-supplied, individually stronger than we are. I’m probably missing a few other advantages, but suffice it to say we can’t stop you from doing what you’re doing. Aggression on our part would be a pointless gesture. Eventually, you’ll track down every surviving terran on Solstice.”

“Yes, that’s about the size of it,” Andoa said, making a gesture to continue.

“But you *don’t* control the timeline on which that happens,” Cass said. “*We* control that. We can drag this out for *years*. Possibly decades. We can force more and more of your resources

to be expended on locating and detaining fewer and fewer terrans — resources that could go elsewhere, to terrans or to other species who need it far more than we do."

"Oh my," Andoa said. Eir voice was absolutely unconcerned. The pivot had not gotten the reaction Cass had hoped for, but she pressed on.

"Our demands aren't unreasonable. We want autonomy, and whatever technical assistance you're willing to offer, with an emphasis on compilers with which we can produce other needed tech and supplies. We also want amnesty for all actions taken in resistance to your abduction program. I'm willing to offer domestication on a purely voluntary basis. I don't *like* it, but both sides being unhappy is the essence of compromise, right?" She felt sick making the offer, like she was sacrificing half of her people for the sake of the other half, but she knew the Affini would never agree to anything that didn't include them getting their all-important florets. Hopefully the carrot would outperform the stick.

"Petal, it is not safe for you to remain on that planet."

"With the appropriate technical assistance, there's no reason we couldn't construct shelters that would be up to a reasonable standard," Cass retorted.

"It's much simpler to just move you up here," e said. "You'll have access to medical attention, compilers, and every other basic amenity, with the appropriate supervision that advanced technology requires. Once we fix the climate and repair the ecosphere, you can move back down there, into nice safe habitats, again, with all the proper amenities."

Cass shook her head. "That's a non-starter. If we all come up here, you can do whatever you want and we'll have no recourse. We won't have any leverage to keep you honest."

"You have no leverage to begin with, little one," Andoa said, patience and condescension melding in eir voice. "It may take us years, though I doubt it. My only care is that some of your comrades down below might get ill or suffer accidents before we can rescue them, and you are making that more likely by resisting us."

"None of that is your concern!" Cass protested. "And it never was! *We'll* take care of them, if you just take the damn deal! Some florets is better than *no* florets, isn't it?"

"Captain," Tsuga said, "I think I may see the misunderstanding, and I may have a solution."

"If you can help her understand her position better, Tsuga," Andoa said, rising to eir feet, "I would be eternally grateful."

"I briefly discussed my previous career in xenoarchaeology with her a few days ago," Tsuga went on, her needles flattening themselves against her bark. Polyphylla draped a few vines around her, perhaps to comfort her. "Specifically, the nature of the work, studying sophont species we were too late to save. Cass, would it be safe to say that you understand our primary goal to be preventing the extinction of other sophont species?"

"Yes, I get it. You want to keep us from wiping ourselves out. I understand why that's a big thing for you," Cass said. "I read the treaty, too, and a couple of commentaries on it I was

able to dredge up. I get that the Accord doesn't get to self-govern because they fought a knock-down, drag-out war against you, and frankly, I wouldn't have trusted anyone involved in the Accord's upper echelons with power *anyway*. But we're not like that, and you don't need to waste your time on us. We agree with you about everything but this floret business, so give us what we need and then leave us alone! We survive, we're autonomous, everyone's happy!"

"Aaaah, I see," Andoa said, nodding. "A simple misunderstanding."

"Cass," Tsuga said gently, "you are missing something very critical–"

"I know, I know," Cass interrupted. "*Florets*. Biological imperative. I *get* it. I said I was willing to allow voluntary domestication — we'll make a list and send it on up to you, and you can pick up your volunteers."

"Don't interrupt, little flower," Andoa said sternly. "Your understanding of our motives, and subsequently our actions, may be flawed, but that's no reason to be rude."

"It's alright," Tsuga said. "But Cass, you are *still* missing the bigger picture. Did I say that right?" she added, glancing at Polyphylla.

"Oh, yes, very good!" Polyphylla said, smiling.

"The bigger picture?" Cass glared up at Tsuga. "What do you mean, bigger picture?"

"Survival is a prerequisite," she said. "Not an end state. We set our sights *far* higher than that."

Cass froze, staring at Tsuga. *Oh. Shit.* Her eyes went wide as the pieces of the puzzle suddenly slammed together in her head.

"Aaaaah," Andoa said cheerfuly. "There we go, I know *that* look on a terran." E paced in a circle around Cass as e spoke, smiling down at her. "Naturally, Cass, you're right: we want to prevent extinction of adorable little xeno species, and we certainly enjoy taking florets from said adorable little xeno species and making them endlessly happy, but we don't stop *there*. You *all* matter to us. Do you understand now?"

Cass had no answer, only the cold sweat that had broken out across her skin. A single thought was jammed in the gears of her mind, locking out every other potential avenue of consideration.

I fucked up. *I fucked up. I fucked up.*

She had completely underestimated how powerful the Affini obsession with florets was, how all-encompassing. It wasn't just preventing extinctions and taking as many florets as they felt like — it included all *potential* florets as well, regardless of whether they wanted to be florets or not. *They believe that it's their responsibility to make every living being in the universe happy, one way or another*. How had she not seen it? All the details were there. Her brain simply hadn't joined them up properly.

There was no way out of this. There was never any negotiation possible beyond a polite fiction, because the Affini would never settle for anything else than absolute power to spoil Solstice rotten. Fighting them was completely impossible, and dragging things out for leverage was meaningless. She was fucked. Everyone down on Solstice was fucked. Everyone throughout the Accord was fucked. Everyone, everywhere, was *fucked*. She felt, only distantly, her knees buckling, and strong vines catching her before she could tumble to the ground.

“Cass?” Andoa’s voice, and eir face looming overhead. “Cass, are you alright?”

“I believe she needs a break,” Polyphylla said. She too came into view, that same look of concern on her face, half-masked by the long red petals that hung from the vines that served as her hair. “Sometimes, when psychologically taxed to an extreme, terrans can ‘lock up’ like this, particularly those of outlier neurotypes, and especially the one which Cass belongs to.”

We’re fucked. We’re all fucked.

“I should get her back to bed,” Tsuga said. Cass felt herself shift, and before she knew it she was in Tsuga’s arms — she would know that feeling anywhere, after the last few days. Somewhere, beneath the horror and self-recrimination, there was the small and comforting thought that Tsuga probably knew exactly how she felt right now.

“Wait a moment, please,” Andoa said. Distantly, as if down a long tunnel, Cass saw em reach out and lay a hand on Tsuga’s shoulder. “It might be better for her to have specialist care and observation. Given her psychological state, and that she’s clearly not letting go of her feralist ideology easily, I think Polyphylla should look after her for a little while.”

Cass felt Tsuga’s vines tighten around her, but her mind was still too far gone to really process the words she was hearing. “You want to remove her from the habitat she feels most comfortable in while she’s having a crisis?!”

“The Captain has a point, Tsuga,” Polyphylla admitted. “She’s a *very* complicated little terran — and I do have experience with terrans, especially ones who require intensive support and analysis for psychological reasons. I think she’ll be alright, and she’ll have a playmate to keep her company at my hab. Not to mention providing a good example for her.” She glanced at Andoa. “I presume you intend for this to be a formal wardship, Captain?”

“Just so. Lenta, would you draw up the appropriate paperwork for little Cass here?

Tsuga watched the door slide shut, her last glimpse of Cass still all but catatonic in Polyphylla’s arms cut off, leaving her alone with Andoa. She didn’t turn to face the Captain so much as simply let her form flow to face em, rippling and shuddering as she strained to keep her emotions under control.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Andoa said, raising a hand to preempt the yet-inchoate protests Tsuga was struggling to give form. “And before you get upset, I am *not* taking her away from you. In fact, I encourage you to go spend time with her. I can’t imagine Polyphylla or Cass will complain.”

“Then *why*?” Tsuga growled, a thundering, cracking noise like an elder tree finally tumbling to the forest floor. “How am I deficient?!”

“You aren’t *deficient*,” Andoa said, sighing. “But you’re not experienced with terrans specifically. Polyphylla *is*. You’ve been in the galaxy less than six months, and she’s been working with terrans since the start of the cotelydon program. If anyone is going to be able to sort out whatever’s keeping Cass tied down to these feralist ideas of hers, not to mention persuade her to give us any helpful information about where all the terrans are hiding, it’s Polyphylla.”

“She’s not a danger to herself,” Tsuga hissed, a noise like water droplets skittering across the hot skillet Cass had showed her how to work.

“But her feralism *may* be a danger to others,” Andoa said. “Others on the surface, and others here. My vines are knotted on this, Tsuga, but it’s *temporary*. We’ll do this by the book. Once Polyphylla makes her report, Cass can come back home to you. You filed that Notice of Intent, right?” It was a rhetorical question — Tsuga was sure Andoa knew full what the answer would be.

“I… haven’t, yet,” Tsuga said, the seething anger turning inward. *I can’t. I’m not good enough, I’ll* break *her somehow.*

“Well, I suggest you get that done,” Andoa said. “It’ll smooth things over when the time comes, but regardless, I’ll make sure it’s known that she’s spoken for. No one’s going to poach her from you.” E reached out with a few vines, interweaving them with some of Tsuga’s own and letting their weight still them from their anxious coiling. “I want her to stay with you, Tsuga — I *like* the two of you together. You fit. It’s honestly very sweet.”

“I’m not so sure,” Tsuga muttered. *Take her now.*

“Then let me be sure for you.” E gave Tsuga’s vines a gentle squeeze. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed the difference in you since our little grey-stripe came aboard. You two are good for each other. And ask yourself this, Tsuga: if you don’t want this, and if you don’t believe you’re the best thing for her–” E grinned and leaned in close. “-then why are you so mad at me right now?”

She had no answer.

Chapter End Notes

I am *eighty thousand words* into this story and I am *only now* getting Cass into the arms of the Affini who was originally the central plant mom. Look forward to Polyphylla getting a *lot* more screentime in the next few chapters.

Chapter 16: Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

> For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

> In which the status quo is disrupted.
> Content Warnings: Lewdness & implied sexual response (the scene with Aletheia), attempted revolutionary martyrdom (the scene with Nell), dysphoria (the second scene with Cass)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took almost ten minutes for Cass to drag herself out of the thought spiral — ten minutes of cursing at herself in her own head for missing something so obvious that she should have intuited it the minute she met the Affini. *I fucked up*. Maybe if she had, she could have found a way out of this, if not for her than for her people. *I fucked up*. But telling herself what she already knew wasn't getting her anywhere. *I fucked up*.

Slowly, she began to pay attention to her surroundings again — the breeze setting the trees surrounding the walkway gently swaying, the heavy floral smell wafting from the chest of the Affini carrying her, the gentle tickle on her hand. It wasn't Tsuga's rich, earthy smell, and the texture of her vines was all wrong, far too soft and yielding. Cass looked up to see Polyphylla, the red petals on her hair vines brushing against her hand, and she jerked it away.

"Ah," Polyphylla said, smiling down at Cass. "Are you coming out of it?"

Put me down! "…" Cass tried to speak, but her mouth and vocal cords stubbornly refused to shift. *Put-?! Fuck!* This was so frustrating — it had happened often enough as a child, but she hadn't suddenly gone nonverbal like this in years. Sure, sometimes a day or two had gone by without more than a few words, forced and uncomfortable but necessary, but total shutdown? *This place is terrible for me*, she thought.

"Cass? Are you having trouble speaking?" Polyphylla said, cocking her head slightly as she studied her.

Dare I hope? She lifted her hands and signed "PUT ME DOWN NOW."

She certainly noticed the movement, squinting down at it. Up close, Cass could see the effort Polyphylla put into copying terran features — a face made of thousands of tiny vines that shifted almost like the real thing. “Is that a manual language? If so, I’m afraid I don’t know it.”

Not so perfect, are you? Can’t even be bothered to learn Esharani. Not that many terrans did, either, Cass had to admit. She let out a frustrated sigh and signed it again, then emphasized it with the simplest gestures she could. *YOU*. She pointed at Polyphylla. *PUT*. She gestured as if placing something on an invisible table. *ME*. She pointed at herself. *DOWN*. And then at the ground.

“You want me to put you down?” When Cass nodded, Polyphylla mirrored the gesture. “I see. But I’m afraid I have to say no, little petal. You’ve overtaxed yourself to the point of briefly entering a dissociative state. I’m taking you to my hab, where I’m going to look after you for the immediate future.”

Cass started to spell out Tsuga’s name before realizing there was no way Polyphylla was going to intuit the Farsi alphabet from hand symbols. She switched to miming writing, as if with a pen on her hand.

“Oh, that’s a good idea!” Polyphylla said. “One moment.” She extracted her tablet from inside her chest, tapped at it for a moment, then held it out in front of Cass. A blank canvas greeted her. “Just write with your finger, little one.”

Cass reached out and began to write Tsuga’s name with her fingertip, then paused and scribbled over it — her brain had still been in Esharani mode, and she’d started writing in Farsi instead of Standard English. “TSUGA????”

“…she’ll be along in a little while, I expect,” Polyphylla said after looking down at the tablet. “She’s probably very irate at the Captain right now, and I don’t blame her, really, but this *is* the best thing for you right now.”

“B.S. TAKE ME BACK.”

“B…S? She raised an eyebrow made entirely out of thin red blossoms. “Does that mean what I think it means? Because if so, don’t think you can sneak foul language past me. I’m *very* familiar with those sorts of tricks.” Cass reached out and underlined TAKE ME BACK. “No. You’re going to be staying with me while I figure out if you can adequately adapt to life in the Compact without assistance.”

“YOU MEAN DOMESTICATE.” Cass glared up at her.

“If necessary, yes,” Polyphylla said. “Whether that’s required is ultimately up to you. Now, I know you’re accustomed to Tsuga, and from what I can tell she has a fairly loose style of xeno care — and that’s all well and good, but it’s not how I do things, and I need you to understand that while you’re under my care, we’ll be doing things *my* way. I expect cooperation, not arguments.”

Cass scribbled over “DOMESTICATE” and wrote “OBEDIENCE,” her glare uninterrupted.

“If you want to put it that way,” Polyphylla said as she turned a corner and advanced toward a habitat draped in broad crimson-edged leaves, like a thicket in a tropical jungle. “I won’t be treating you like a floret, but while you’re under wardship I *am* responsible for you and *do* have the authority to give you orders. Acting out will be noted, and it will influence my final decision. As I said, the outcome is up to you.” She paused at the doorway, and something in her demeanor shifted. She became somehow harder, as if every vine in her body had tensed up suddenly. “There is, however, one thing I wish to make perfectly clear. I do not think you would be intentionally cruel to my floret, but if you hurt her or upset her in any way, I will be extremely unhappy with you.”

There was no room for Cass to do anything but nod. The sheer force of Polyphylla’s attention upon her was like one of Tsuga’s enormous hands pressing her down into the floor. It was like the Affini that had been holding her had been suddenly replaced with another, much more dangerous Affini.

“Good,” she said. “I’m glad we understand one another.” Her expression softened, the terrible pressure on Cass lifted, and the door slid out of the way. She stepped inside, and into a forest that was a riot of colors. Every inch of the floor was coated in clover and other small floral plants, the walls were morning glories and lovechains and a dozen other flowering vines, and the ceiling was draped with further varieties hanging from branches that Cass would swear were real. Above them the sky — not the far side of the ring, but an impossible sky. In and among the flowers, she could pick out furniture, all Affini-sized, including a kitchen nook artfully concealed behind a thick, knotty tree trunk that spangled with shimmering moss.

“Don’t worry about stepping on anything, dear,” Polyphylla said as she gently set Cass down. “It’s all quite tough. Now then…” She straightened up and raised her voice. “Leah! Come out and meet our guest!” She chuckled, and added in a low voice, “Oh, what a surprise she’ll get.”

Leah? No. I didn’t hear that right, Cass thought.

“Mistress! Coooomiiiing!”

But that was her voice. How–?

From an arch made of two trees entwined together, Leah — blonde, spaced-out, same-as-ever Leah — emerged, blinking against the light of the artificial sky. Her eyes took a moment to adjust, but it was clear when they had, for she stopped halfway across the clearing that made up what must have been the common room. “Cassie? Cassie!”

Why is Leah here? Cass blinked, confused, as Leah broke into a run and threw her arms around her, squeezing tightly.

“Cassie!! Yay!” She laughed and leaned into Cass, gazing up at Polyphylla with a look in her eyes Cass had never seen before, a kind of entranced worshipfulness seeming to spill over like an overfilled cup. “Mistress, did I forget my birthday? ’Cause this is the best present ever!”

“No, dear,” Polyphylla said, kneeling down and stroking Leah’s golden hair. “Cass is going to be staying with us for a while, so you’ll get to see lots of her. But,” she added, “she’s still recovering from that incident I told you about, and she’s had a very busy day already today, so be gentle with her. Maybe just some snuggling, yes?”

“Okay~” Leah said, closing her eyes and sighing happily.

Why is Polyphylla Leah’s owner? Cass awkwardly hugged Leah back, looking up at Polyphylla and trying with all her might to make her useless, locked-up mouth work. “….why?” she finally managed to rasp out.

“…why what, Cass?” Polyphylla said.

“…here,” she managed, nodding down at Leah.

“…why is– Cass, she *lives* here, she’s my– ah.” She smiled. “Leah, dear, when you met Cass, did you introduce yourself?”

“Huh?” Leah blinked. “Uhm….maybe?”

Polyphylla ruffled her hair and chuckled. “Okay, we’ll work on reinforcing that a little tonight. I’m sorry, Cass, I thought you knew she was my floret. Leah’s implicit memory is still a work in progress, and sometimes things just get forgotten. Proper introductions seem to be a particular sticking point. For now, Leah, dearest, what do we do when we forget something?”

“Do it to remember it!” she chirped, giggling. “Hi, I’m Leah Aptenia, First Floret!”

“Good girl!” Polyphylla said, a few of her vines coiling around Leah and giving her a good squeeze as she continued to pet the squirming little terran. Cass could feel every movement, and the look on Leah’s face was nothing short of sheer bliss. “Very good girl!”

“You’ve… had her spying on me?” Cass croaked. Her mind was torn between horror at what she was watching, dread that she was going to end up the same way, and anger that Leah had been used like that. *On top of having her mind scrambled. What did Polyphylla* do *to her that broke her memory this badly?!*

“No, you meeting in the grocery was just happy coincidence,” Polyphylla said. “Leah took a liking to you all on her own.”

“Mmmhmmm,” Leah murmured. She rested her head on Cass’s chest and let her eyes slip shut again. “You’re *very* likeable.”

“And I certainly didn’t object,” Polyphylla added. “You seem like a very level-headed little xeno, and I thought having direct experience of domesticated terrans would help you overcome your discomfort with the idea. Alas, it seems we’ve still got some work to do on that score, but that’s alright. Nome wasn’t built in a day.”

Cass didn’t have the energy or the verbal wherewithal to correct her.

Aletheia wasn't sure what had happened — one minute, she'd been there, lying on the couch and watching the pony show and trying to figure out if ponies were based on a real animal like how the platypus was based on beavers, and the next Pisca was scooping her up into her arms and all but sprinting out the door. "Wh-what? Where are we–?"

"Hush, petal, just a quick walk," Pisca said, weaving her way out onto the footpath. "That, and maybe some gentle snuggling at the other end. I don't know, this is kind of my first time on this side of an emergency."

"Emergency? What happened?" Aletheia tried to sit up a little in Pisca's arms, but she was already turning down another path toward a hab. She'd never seen Pisca move so quickly, and by the time she brushed her windblown hair out of her eyes (*stars*, it was already getting long!) the door was sliding out of the way.

"Tsuga, I'm here!" Pisca called out, but she needn't have, for Tsuga — or at least, an enormous mass of bark and needles that was probably Tsuga — was pacing back and forth in the common room of the hab, clearly agitated. "Oh. There you are. Tsuga, please calm down, alright?"

Tsuga kept pacing, and said something in rumbling, wavering Affini.

"I *know*, Tsuga," Pisca said. "Look, Allie is here. Would a hug help settle you?"

Suddenly, Aletheia realized why she'd been brought along. "H-hi, Tsuga. Uhm, *Miss* Tsuga. Sorry." One of Pisca's vines reached up under her skirt, coiled around her thigh, and squeezed — a quiet little way of saying *good girl*, and she couldn't help but shiver a little.

Tsuga finally seemed to notice her, because she stood still for a moment, then slowly began to gather herself. "I'm very sorry, little one," she said as she came together. "I hope I didn't scare you."

Aletheia shook her head — it hadn't been scary, just worrying. "Is everything okay?"

Tsuga was silent for a long moment. Finally, she approached Pisca and Aletheia, and lifted a hand to stroke Aletheia's hair. "You look very happy there," she said softly.

"Y-yeah," Aletheia said, biting her lip and leaning into the petting. *Stars*, petting felt so good. It was like her mind sliding just a little bit out of focus, a comfortable slackening. How had she gone her whole life up to now without it? "I, uhm– I-" She couldn't make the words come out, the grin spreading across her face too unshakeable for speech, her mind too loose and unfocused.

"Look how easily she drops," Pisca said, and Aletheia could feel the pride in her voice. "No xenodrugs in her system at all. Good girl," she added in a low whisper, and Aletheia felt warmth spill gently through her body. *I'm a good girl*, she thought, her body following her mind into relaxation. She slumped, eyes half-lidded, mouth ever so slightly open. *I love when she does this to me*.

“Some xenos are naturals,” Tsuga replied. “They just…belong with us.” Something was wrong with her voice. Somewhere, distantly, Aletheia felt an empathetic twinge in her heart. *Is Miss Tsuga sad?* she thought. *Why would she be sad? What's wrong?*

“How long will the wardship last?”

“I don't know,” Tsuga said. “As long as it takes for Polyphylla to get information about the terrans on the planet, and to determine if she needs domestication or whether she can adapt as an independent sophont.”

Aletheia blinked. *Cass…domesticated? But I thought…*

“So, you just have to wait a little, and she'll come back to you,” Pisca said. Aletheia watched her vines entangle with Tsuga's, felt Pisca's vines around her thighs squeezing them gently together, and she let out a little whimper. *More,* she thought as she sank deeper.

“It wasn't like this when she went out on her own,” Tsuga said quietly. “We were very intentional about that, to give her space so I wouldn't entrance her so easily. Now she's just *gone*.”

“Do you want to go see her? Allie's been wanting to talk to her. You could come along.” Another squeeze, another whimper. Aletheia was dimly aware she was the object of conversation now. *Play with me*. Half-wish, half-prayer, the desire welled up out of her and briefly shaped itself into a thought before it popped like a soap bubble. She was not a thing that played host to thoughts at the moment. She had been here before. Thoughts were unnecessary. Mistress would do her thinking for her.

“Polyphylla wants her to have rest,” Tsuga said. “And she did have a very negative experience today, which she reacted poorly to. And… I'm not certain I'm good for her to be around, in any case. I may have been the cause of a great deal of misunderstanding and misfortune.” The words washed over Aletheia, but she paid them little heed. Her tongue, lolling out of her mouth, brushed against one of Mistress's vines, and she could taste its green and vivid beauty.

“Then we'll go tomorrow,” Mistress said. “Just for a little while shouldn't be too much for her. And I know she'll want to see you. If my Aletheia had to spend time away from me, she'd want to see me as soon as she could.” It wasn't a question, but a statement. Her Mistress' voice penetrated to the core of Aletheia's being — it was not a *thought* but a *knowing* that her Mistress was right. “Would you like us to keep you company for tonight?”

“That might be nice,” Tsuga said. “I would appreciate it, I think.” She paused her petting, lifted Aletheia's chin with one finger and peering into her eyes. Miss Tsuga's eyes weren't as pretty as her Mistress's, but Aletheia still felt herself falling into them. “Would you like that, Allie?” Another set of vines joined Pisca's, stealing gently along her skin and coiling around her. Aletheia stared blankly up at Tsuga, consumed by the attention.

“Oh, little Allie,” Mistress said, barely containing a giggle. “Tsuga asked you a question, silly. Say, *Yes, Miss Tsuga.*”

“Yes, Miss Tsuga,” Aletheia said, her mouth moving mechanically. One some level, she knew these were words, and that she was speaking, but they weren’t *her* words — Mistress had given them to her. Her part had simply been to repeat them.

“Good girl,” Mistress purred, and something deep inside Aletheia clenched, a jolting arc that seemed to rock back and forth as it reached up into her body. A single whimper escaped her mouth, and then a series of gasps that trailed off. She felt warm, soft, and limp, her eyes sliding further out of focus. “What a good, good girl you are.”

Cass had passed the day in a haze, part still recovering from the meeting, part overwhelmed by Polyphylla’s hyper-floral hab, and part trying to cope with learning that Leah had been Polyphylla’s floret the entire time. It was still something she couldn’t quite believe, even though she’d spent most of the intervening time with Leah attached to her like a limpet as they cuddled on the sofa. Ordinarily, Cass would have few complaints about a pretty woman glomming onto her in such a fashion, but today had not been a good day for her brain to shift into that particular gear thus far.

More importantly, she had other things on her mind, thoughts she slowly fished up from the abyss and reassembled one by one. *There was never any chance of us getting out of this* was the central theme — the futility of everything she’d done to try to protect her people from the grasping vines of the Affini and their obsession with domesticating other species weighed on her. *There has to be a way out* was a strain of thought still flickering desperately in the back halls of her mind, frantically rifling through memory for any strategy that might pan out. She hadn’t taken the name Hope for nothing.

She was in the crosshairs herself, now — Polyphylla had said as much. First, they’d broken Aletheia, and the Captain clearly had eir sights set on Nell. *They won’t be satisfied until the entire population is collared*. Figuratively, if not literally. She was still uncertain just how far they planned to take that. Her abject failure to protect Aletheia in particular burned inside her, a hot ember at the back of her neck, as she wrestled with the dueling thoughts *she made her choice, even if it’s a bad one* and *they got inside her head and* made *her want it*.

And the equally chilling thought: *how long until they do that to me?* Her lease on free thought might already be up. What was it like, when they got inside your head? Did you *feel* it? Were you aware of the difference? Did you *remember* how you used to be? Leah clearly didn’t — Leah could barely keep herself in a conversation sometimes, especially when it concerned her past.

“Cass?”

What if they already got inside my head and made me the way I am now? What if this is some weird experiment of theirs? What if I already have the implant?! Her hand flew to the back of her neck — still no scar. *What if they made it so I can’t notice it?!*

“Cass? Hello?”

Are these my thoughts or their thoughts? Am I even here, or is this some kind of mental construct? God, what if I’m still back in Bulwark and this has all just been Polyphylla

hacking my brain the morning they landed?!

“Cassie!” Leah leaned in and gave her a loud, exaggerated smooch on the cheek.

“Hnn?!” Cass bolted upright. “What?!”

“Oh, good, that did the trick,” Polyphylla said, laughing. “Good work, flower,” she added, patting Leah on the head. “Cass, it’s time to start getting ready for bed.”

Cass blinked. “What time is it?”

“It’s bedtime,” Polyphylla said. “I’ve let you have the day mostly to yourself — I know you’ve been through a lot, and I wanted you to have time to think it through. But it’s getting late, and a good night’s sleep is just as important to your recovery. I have Class-Z on hand if you need it, and don’t worry, I checked with Arvense, it’s the same as the ones Tsuga used on you, perfectly safe for your neurotype.”

“I mean, I’m not tired,” Cass replied. “I can decide when to go to bed for myself.”

“Cass.” Polyphylla leaned in, and Cass quickly jerked her gaze away from the Affini’s eyeline. “What did I say about arguments?”

“I’m not *arguing*, I’m explaining,” Cass said through gritted teeth. “I’m a grown-ass woman, and I know when I’m tired enough to sleep.”

“That’s what the Class-Z is for,” Polyphylla said patiently.

“Let’s go to bed,” Leah said, pouting. “I wanna snuggle!”

“… you’ve been snuggling me all day,” Cass pointed out.

“Horizontal snuggles are different!”

“Go ahead and get dressed for bed, petal,” Polyphylla said. “I’ll help Cass and then we’ll come check on you, okay?”

“Mmm, okay, Mistress,” Leah purred. She planted another kiss on Cass’s cheek before scooting to the edge of the sofa, jumping down, and skipping off. That left Cass alone with Polyphylla.

“No more arguments, I presume?”

“Look, I get that you’re used to Leah, but I don’t *need* this level of attention,” Cass protested, still not looking up at Polyphylla.

“It’s my job to evaluate your ability to self-care,” Polyphylla replied. “That means setting a standard and seeing how well you’re able to uphold it. One criteria is a stable bedtime to ensure an appropriate amount of sleep each night. So: it’s bedtime.”

“This is going to be a miserable experience, isn’t it?” Cass said.

“Only if you let it be one. Now then.” Several of her vines produced a neatly folded garment from behind her, which she laid in Cass’s lap. “Go ahead and put that on.”

Cass unfolded the garment and looked at it. It was some kind of overlong shirt, or given the way the waist narrowed and the hemline flared, maybe a dress. God, it *was* a dress. It boasted an extremely loud red-and-golden flower print. “No.”

Polyphylla raised a floral eyebrow. Even from the corner of her eye, Cass could see she was creepily good at the expression. “What do you mean, no?”

“This is a dress. I’m not– I don’t *do* dresses, okay? I look ridiculous in them.” She closed her eyes and sighed. “Look, you’re the big human expert, right? You *do* know what butch means, don’t you?”

“You prefer masculine presentation over feminine,” Polyphylla answered.

“So… yeah. I appreciate the thought, but this is a non-starter. I’ll just sleep in my underwear. It’s warm enough here for that.” She tried to slide off the couch, but several of Polyphylla’s vines caught her by the legs and held her tightly. Cass considering struggling, but after a moment simply settled for clenching her fists. “You’re not letting me go until I agree to put that thing on, aren’t you?”

“More or less,” Polyphylla said, smiling cheerfully.

“And this is going to figure into that pointless evaluation of yours?”

“Oh, certainly,” she agreed.

Cass felt her fingernails dig into her palms. *You’re a prisoner. It’s just like when the screws and the suits were in charge. Go along and wait for an opportunity. You know how to do that*. “Fine,” she growled. “But tomorrow, *real* clothes.”

“Easily done,” Polyphylla said. “We’ll pick out a suitable wardrobe together.”

Cass knew better than to argue the point now, but she had no intention of letting Polyphylla pick a single item of anything she wore from now on. *I’ll have to be vigilant*, she thought as she stripped her tank top off. *Beat her to it. Already have stuff printed up.* The trousers followed, but before she could pull on the dress, Polyphylla lifted it into the air above her. Two of her vines tapped gently on Cass’s arms. “Up.”

Cass glared up at her. “*This* is deeply unnecessary, and demeans us both,” she growled as she lifted her arms.

“Oh, I disagree on both counts,” Polyphylla said as she settled the dress down onto Cass’s body, tugging gently with her vines. “And as I thought, you look *very* fetching in that. Go on, go see Leah! She’ll *love* this.”

“Eugh.” Cass rolled her eyes and pushed off, sliding down to the flower-carpeted floor. The dress wasn’t uncomfortable, beyond not being the sort of thing she’d ever wear. She probably looked absolutely ludicrous in it, her long and gangly legs sticking out *much* too far beyond

the hem that only fell to mid-thigh, and never mind her broad shoulders that dwarfed the thin ribbon that hung onto the back of her neck. It was almost entirely open in the back, and it made her feel naked in a way that actually being naked probably wouldn't have.

She wandered through the tree-trunk arch she'd seen Leah come from earlier, and into a twilit clearing that, if anything, made the common room of Polyphylla's hab look plain. The walls were subtle, trees and bushes and creepers all working together to give the illusion of depth beyond their reach. Though the sky above was dark and star-flecked, light came from the gently glowing butterflies that fluttered in little clustered clouds overhead. One broad tree had doors built into it, making it a kind of wardrobe, while another had sunken pockets that made shelves, where various knickknacks and stuffed animals were displayed. Over a mound of rocks, a waterfall seemed to pour, its surface as smooth and reflective as a mirror — the butterflies seemed to love it, clustering around its borders. In pride of place at the back of the clearing was an enormous four-poster bed that looked as if it had grown out of a truly grand tree-stump, shimmering sheets draped over a mattress that had to be at least two feet thick.

It looked like the kind of place a faerie princess would sleep.

Leah sad on a stool in front of the mirrorfall, peering into it as she tied back her hair. She was wearing a nightdress identical to the one Polyphylla had forced on Cass, and as far as Cass was concerned, she wore it *much* better — it revealed the delicate curve of her thighs, the soft nape of her neck. An old, familiar feeling welled up inside her. The alien HRT was, indeed, doing its work — she hadn't felt the hooks of hormones like this for some time. *Just what I need at 44,* she thought. *A third puberty*.

As Leah finished with her hair, she glanced up; in the mirrorfall, her eyes met with Cass's. "Cassie!" She spun around, springing to her feet with joy written across her face. "Oh my stars, we *match!*" She pulled Cass into a hug and buried her face against the soft fabric of the dress — whatever it was made of, it was smooth and slid easily over her skin rather than catching and dragging and irritating. She hugged Leah back, and in the mirrorfall saw Polyphylla leaning down to peer through the arch, smiling warmly.

It wasn't about me, Cass realized. *It was all for her.* Somehow, that made the frustration slacken a bit. She could see herself in the mirrorfall, too, could see how the dress rested perfectly on her body despite her body being…well, her body. She'd been right; she looked ridiculous. She hadn't shaved her legs in years, her shoulders jutted out to either side, and her hair hung limp and tired. Next to someone as gorgeous as Leah, it made the effect a hundred times worse. Leah, at least, didn't seem to care — she was burrowing into Cass and squeezing as tightly as she could. *I look like shit*, she thought, *but at least it seems to make her happy*.

Nell woke up shivering. That was good — it meant she wasn't hypothermic yet, or if she was, she was still in the early stages. The chemical heater she'd cracked and shaken the night before was a lukewarm ember against her stomach, and the sleeping bag had done its level best to keep as much of that heat inside itself with Nell as it could, but it still got damn cold at night, even inside an insulated tent. She peeled the bag off to just below her arms and reached into her pack, pulling out one of the hot breakfast kits. This too came with a chemical

heater, which (with a little rigging and a bit of water) began to sizzle and heat up a hot, nourishing porridge and a flask of potent, chemically stabilized coffee. The waste heat also helped to make the tent a few fractions of a degree warmer.

Soon, she was gulping down the porridge and chasing it with the coffee. The warmth sat like a hot coal in her belly, and the shivering abated not long after. Two days out from Grimké, and already it had become a routine. Next, she would secure her supplies in the pack, strike the tent, and take down the thermal baffling. Then, she'd strap on the skis, check her bearings with her compass and map, and set off. The work of skiing, the movement of her limbs, would keep her warm through the day, as would one of the hot lunch kits. She'd have to be careful, though — she only had so many of those, taken from the supply cache at Grimké.

There had been no one there when she arrived in the jeep, and that was good. Grimké was an open town from the Quaker days, and had little to no cover, and so everyone who lived there lived with the knowledge that, at any moment, they might have to abandon anything and make for one of the nearby shelters. There were no less than four to choose from even within winter walking distance, and so Nell had no idea where they'd be — that, too, was by design, and it meant that leaving the jeep there wouldn't threaten anyone. She'd taken a bit of extra supplies from the cache and set out under convenient cloud cover immediately, and she'd been in the bush ever since.

Her body felt as warm as it was likely to get, so she peeled the sleeping bag the rest of the way off and rolled it up into its tight little package. That went into the pack, as did the mess kit. She unzipped the tent and stepped out into the snow, the brilliant silvery mesh of the thermal baffle hiding the sky and the tops of the trees from her. It stretched a good twenty feet beyond her little tent, enough to let the waste heat of her body and her cooking, what little leaked from the tent itself, to vanish into the wind before it made a hotspot visible to sensors — to terran sensors, anyway. Still, they hadn't pounced on her that first night, when she'd barely slept for fear of needing to run at a moment's notice. Maybe it did work. That was good news for her, for Trish, and for everyone else moving around and relying on the baffles.

The tent packed down into a little cylinder not much bigger than the sleeping bag. That, she strapped to the pack, which she laid with the skis and poles against a tree. Now came the annoying part — the baffle was stretched between six trees, and she'd have to go around unhooking it from every one before she could collapse it down and fold it up. One at a time, she unhooked each; it was only on the fifth that she spared a glance up at the sky, and it froze her colder than the night ever could.

There was an Affini shuttle directly overhead, maybe a hundred meters up, its ventral surface glowing a fierce but utterly silent blue-violet.

"Fuck!" she hissed, trying to skitter back under the now-limp thermal baffle. *How long has that fucker been up there?! Does it know I'm here?* She tried to slow her breathing. *It can't. They'd have tried to get me in my sleep. They must just be patrolling, and they stopped for some reason. Right? I just have to wait them out.* Hopefully, they'd move on before she froze to death — she dared not fire another chemical heater this close, even with the baffle.

And then she heard a soft *THUMP* that nearly stopped her heart. *What the fuck was that?*

Another *THUMP* in the distance, something falling against the snow. Then another. She risked a glance out from under the thermal baffle, and saw something *big* plunge from high above to the ground, landing behind a stand of trees.

They're coming. For a moment, it was all Nell could do to curl up into a ball in fear. *Can I get away on the skis? Not fast enough. They were chasing down the fucking jeep!*

More *THUMPs*. Was that six, or seven? Nell had lost count. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes as she realized that she had only one way out of this situation. Her gloved fingers closed around something cold and hard in her pocket, and she flung off the thermal baffle. There were Affini all around her, some close, some far, all closing in on her step by calculated step, like the woods themselves had judged her guilty of some terrible crime and had come alive to exact cruel justice. No two of them looked the same, each a horrifying wilderness spirit come to life. Their glowing eyes peered out at her through plates of bark and wood, their foliage mostly tucked away beneath it.

"Stay back!" she shouted, pulling the grenade out and brandishing it like some kind of sacred ward. "Don't come any closer!" The Affini stopped, save one, the closest.

"Hello, little one," it said — and though Nell could scarcely tell it from any other Affini, she recognized that voice in an instant. *The one that was chasing us*, she thought, shuddering as she remembered the bellowing shouts and their paradoxically gentle and condescending content. "We've been looking for you for a bit. It's a little cold out, don't you think? I certainly think so!" it added, chuckling. It extended an open hand. "Wouldn't you like to come with us? We have hot cocoa!"

"Stay away from me!" Nell hissed. "I won't let any of you monsters inside my head, not again! I'm not going to just break down and be some kind of… some kind of useless *pet*, like McCracken did! I'll die first!"

That got its attention. "Don't say things like that, petal," it said, crouching down but still towering over Nell. "No one wants that for you."

"It's better than the alternative!" Nell spat. "Better than… than not even having a mind of my own!"

"Nell," the alien said, and her gut twisted in abject terror. *Why does it know my name?!* Nell thought. "The Captain is very worried about you. Ever since I told em that I saw you, e's been asking me for updates. E's going to be so happy to hear that you're safe."

"Safe, am I?" Nell said. *Only one way out*, she thought, clamping down on her terror. For a long time, she'd wondered if she could do it, if the need arose — if she could be a martyr in the revolution's name. Now, those quiet back-of-the-head thoughts became all too real. She remembered a line from Mao — *Be resolute, fear no sacrifice, and surmount every difficulty to win victory* — and laughed to herself. "I really am turning into Cass," she muttered.

"What was that, flower?"

She wasn't afraid to sacrifice herself, Nell thought, *and neither am I*. She forced herself to look up at the xeno, staring at a point just above its freaky, creepy eyes. "You tell your Captain to go fuck themself," she said evenly, as she pulled the pin from the grenade.

Chapter End Notes

I finally, *finally,* ***finally*** get to start writing the lewd shit! Tune in next time for even more Lewd Shit.

(And on that note, don't worry about Nell, she's fine. The Captain isn't about to take no for an answer.)

Chapter 17: Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

In which I turn a dial labeled "Smut" steadily up, looking back at the audience for approval.
Content Warnings: Look, this is an entire chapter of nothing but negotiations about smut and then said smut. Key features include suspension bondage, sensation play, orgasm denial, and dub-con. Please do not ignore that last, because this is some *dub-ass* con right here. If this ain't your speed, don't worry — nothing super plot important happens here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The light was what drove Nell to wakefulness — it wasn't harsh, but it was insistent, pushing its way in through her eyelids until she stirred, rubbing at them and squinting out at the world. She was on a big, circular cushion, a dull moss-green disc with a soft, almost furry texture. Beyond it, there was only depthless shadow.

Where am I? She was still wearing her thermal underwear and underlayer, but her overlayer and heavy coat were nowhere to be seen. She had been in the bush, hadn't she? Surrounded by snow, trees, and nothing for miles. She'd been moving cross country toward–

The Affini.

Memory intruded as the light had just moments ago, and just as relentlessly. The Affini had come, leaping out of the sky itself and surrounding her. She'd picked up a grenade and– *oh, fuck. Am I dead?* She looked around, but the shadows were no less eager to yield than they'd been a moment ago. The world was dead silent, the only sounds her anxious breathing, her heart thudding against her chest. "…hello?"

"Hello, little one," a voice came back — a frighteningly familiar voice, full of the same confidence and condescension she remembered. She spun around to face it, and finally spied the subtle flash of six eyes staring down at her from the darkness. "You gave us a merry run-around, didn't you?"

“Stay away!” Nell shouted, trying to skitter away and tripping over the cushion. She came within inches of hitting her head on the dark, featureless ground, but vines snaked out from the nothingness can caught her.

“Careful, pet,” the Captain said. The light broadened, revealing more detail to the shadowy room, and revealing Andoa as well. E stood there, towering over Nell, a fuzzy shape framed by a strange hexagonal lattice that stretched across the entire ceiling. “I wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself.”

“I’m not your pet!” Nell spat, struggling against the vines. They slackened, and she slipped free. She glanced frantically around, searching for an avenue of escape, but the room’s four walls were all the same, paneled in odd patterns, and no sign of a door.

“That’s not what the paperwork says,” Andoa replied, chuckling. “Of course, you haven’t signed yours, yet, since you were just a bit unconscious, but we’ll get to that, don’t worry.”

“I don’t know how you got me up here,” Nell snarled, rounding on Andoa, “or why I’m even alive, but….don’t you *dare* get inside my head again!” It was an empty threat, and Nell knew the Captain was perfectly aware of it. Her heat was beating against her ribs even faster than before, and her lungs burned with the anticipated need for more oxygen in a struggle for her life.

“You’re alive because one Vella Ruellia was able to snatch that little explosive away from you and throw it as far away as she could,” Andoa said. “You shouldn’t play with such dangerous things. As for how you got up here, well, a little Class-Z and some delta-v go a long way.” E paused, looking down at Nell. “You’re genuinely frightened of me, aren’t you?” Something about the way Andoa said it set her hair on end — it was like the monster was *surprised*.

“You *did things* to my fucking *brain*,” Nell said. “What do you fucking *think?*”

“I think that if you’re still experiencing that block, you must be even more susceptible to hypnosis than I thought,” Andoa said a wry edge to eir voice. “Let’s find out. Go ahead, flower. Say it.”

“No!” Nell said, her heart leaping into her throat. “I’m not going to go through that again! I’m not going to just give you the excuse!”

“You have my permission, Nell, this one time, to say that awful word. I just want to see if you can — that’s all. I won’t be upset at you for doing it.”

Nell shivered, seized her lip between her teeth for a moment. *You can’t show weakness in front of this thing*, she thought. *You can’t let it think that you can just be* rewritten *like that! Say it!* “….w-wormhead,” she muttered, stammering through a veil of terror and apprehension. Her gut clenched, but she didn’t hear the voice in the back of her head, didn’t feel the catch in her breath. *It’s…gone?*

“See?” Andoa smiled, which did absolutely nothing to make Nell feel better — it was like some kind of moss-monster had crawled out of her nightmares and was making plans to eat

her for breakfast. “No lingering effects beyond, thankfully, a decreased willingness to say something so awful and unkind about florets.” E began to pace in a circle around Nell, taking eir steps slowly, never once looking away from her. “Believe me, Nell, if I *wanted* to snap your will like a twig, I could do it, but that would be boring. There’s no stakes, no risk. I much prefer *my* way of doing things.”

“I’ll never give in,” Nell hissed. “I won’t be some… useless, stupid pet!”

“First, don’t be rude, not even to yourself,” Andoa said smoothly. “Second, my dear, why would I ever want a pet that was anything but exceptional? And you, Nell?” E leaned down, still grinning, until e was face to face with her. She was pinned to the spot by dread. “You are *certainly* exceptional.”

“Go fuck yourself,” she whispered, her voice refusing to work.

“I have taken three florets in my life,” Andoa said, ignoring her, “and each of them in their turn *begged* me for it. I think you will too, when the time comes — but we’ll find out together.”

“I’ll never beg you for anything,” Nell said, finding a measure of courage in Andoa’s odd phrasing. *The fuck does this thing mean, find out together?* “No matter what happens, the revolutionary spirit will prevail!”

“Ah yes, the immortal science of Marxism-Leninism!” Andoa said cheerfully, squatting down, eir grin growing somehow wider. “The natural outgrowth of capitalist development from the feudal economic model, the inescapable boom-bust cycle, and the inevitable rise of the dictatorship of the proletariat led by a vanguard party of committed revolutionaries. Wonderful stuff, Nell. You may consider me an enthusiastic comrade in the struggle for the universal liberation of all workers!”

“…what?” Of all the things Nell had expected to come out of the monster’s mouth, that was *not* on the list.

“I’m still working my way through the subsequent thinkers, of course,” Andoa went on, gesturing vaguely with one hand. “You communists certainly like to write! But that’s fine: I’m well and truly fascinated, and after all, what good owner doesn’t take an interest in their pet’s own interests, hm?”

“I’m *not* your pet!” Nell insisted. *I don’t know what this nonsense is, but I’m not going let the bastard pull a fast one on me.*“And if you were a real communist, you wouldn’t *want* me to be!”

“Ah, see, that’s where we differ. I’m afraid I may have to be a bit of a splitter here. Or perhaps a revisionist? I’m not even done with Trotsky, yet, so you’ll forgive me if I’m retreading any ground here, but it seems to me that keeping you as a pet, Nell, would be the ultimate form of liberation — you would be liberated from any sort of want, concern, or worry. That’s a kind of liberation even independent sophonts don’t get.”

“That’s *not*– how do you even– fuck!” Nell threw up her hands. “Am I supposed to be confused or just pissed off that you’re getting the theory all wrong? Or are you just trying to, I don’t know, fuck with my head in some novel way?”

“I’m attempting to share an interest with my soon-to-be pet,” Andoa said, a note of confusion in eir voice. “I honestly thought you’d be happier about this.”

“Why would I be *happy* about you doping me up on a dozen different drugs and brainwashing me?”

“Who said I was going to dope you up on a dozen different drugs?” Andoa replied casually. “And who said I would brainwash you? I *could* do those things, of course, and I’d ensure that you enjoy the process thoroughly. You would be in very good vines, Nell. Would you prefer that?”

“Of course not!” Nell spat.

“*Good*,” Andoa said, eir eyes lighting up in a way that carried all the implied threat of an enormous, man-eating shark suddenly breaching up from the inky depths of the pre-collapse ocean, like in the movies. Nell felt as if she’d swallowed a block of ice. “And that’s why we’re going to play a game, little flower,” Andoa said. The lights came up fractionally brighter, further emphasizing the sheer emptiness of the room. There was no way out, and nowhere to hide. “A game with a wager, to make it fun. If you win, you walk out of here a free and independent sophont, and I will vouch for your ability to adapt to life in the Compact without domestication.”

What the fuck is going on? This has to be some kind of trick. “And if I refuse to play this game?” Nell said, glaring. “What then?”

Andoa shrugged and stood up. “If you decline, then I suppose you weren’t right for me to begin with. I’ll pass you off to someone else — Vella perhaps, she certainly liked you — and they’ll break you, and you’ll be a happy little pet. Safe, easy, boring. Or–“ E licked eir lips, or at least, mimed doing so, and Nell shuddered at how uncannily terran the gesture seemed. “Or, you play the game, and have the chance to remain independent.”

“Don’t fucking bullshit me!” She leaned forward, fists clenched, as if ready for a fight. “You think I trust you? You’re just another imperialist invader. Nothing you can say will ever make me believe you’ll follow through!”

“Language, petal,” Andoa said. “I can see we’ll have to work on that. And as to whether you can trust me, well…” Andoa shrugged again. “Say no, be a happy pet. Say yes, and maybe be a happy pet, or maybe walk free, if that’s what you really want. Ask yourself this, Nell: what have you got to lose but your chains?” There came that entirely-too-dangerous grin again.

Nell stared up at the Captain. It was so odd — this monster so easily reached into her mind and made it a plaything, and here it was offering her a path to freedom. *It has to be some kind of trick. Still, I can’t afford not to take that chance*. “Fine,” she said. “But don’t try to fuck me on this — I win, I walk.”

“Indeed, little one,” Andoa purred. Eir entire body seemed to ripple with excitement, beds of moss and delicate fronds shifting around. “I’m very happy you’ve agreed to this. It proves I wasn’t mistaken about you. You’re a *fighter*, and that’s just what I want.” E lifted the cushion and tapped one of the walls many panels — it opened, sliding out, and e tucked the cushion into the space within with a few of eir vines. “Now then, this is a game of stimulation and self-control. You’re going to endure whatever I do to you, if you can, for a certain period of time. If you can hold out that entire time, you win. If you ask me to stop before that time elapses, I win. Now, pay attention, because this is important: this is a game of many rounds. If I win this first round, there will be others. I have to win each round to keep you here with me, but you only have to win a single round for me to turn you loose.”

“And what *are* you going to do?” Nell said. *It can’t be any worse than what the screws used to do.* “Stress positions? Electrostunners? Waterboarding?”

“What? No. I’m going to touch you, of course,” Andoa said, gesturing with eir vines, passing a few of them close enough for Nell to see their gently feathered texture. “I have a great deal of experience in terran sensory modes and the usual responses to them. Tickling, for example — very amusing!”

“…you want to *tickle* me?” Nell said. *What the fuck is going on?*

“Tickling will certainly play a role, but there are other kinds of touch. Pleasurable touch, for example — petting, stroking, and so on. And there’s painful touch as well, from rasping to scratching to striking.” Another vine passed by, this one with dangerous-looking thorns peeking out from beneath the fuzzy moss.

There it is. “I get it. You want to beat me into submission. Classic,” Nell growled.

“I have no desire to cause you harm, little one,” Andoa said — e sounded genuinely shocked. “I would certainly never cause you a lasting injury. The goal is *sensation*. Little scratches, little slaps, that sort of thing. A little bit of gentle marking. Shall we say that if I leave a bruise or draw blood, we count that as a win for you? I can be *very* delicate, if that’s what you need.”

“You….you understand how skeevy this all sounds, right?,” Nell said. “Are you some kind of, what, alien plant pervert?” *This can’t be happening. This is the last weird thoughts I’m having before I die. I blew myself up with a grenade. There’s no way this is real.*

E laughed, and it was perhaps the most straightforward and honest sound Nell had ever heard come out of the Captain. “I was wondering how long it would take you to call me that,” e said as eir laughter trailed off. A measure of mirth remained in eir voice. “For some reason, terrans think this is perverted, and I think that’s honestly just the funniest little thing about you.”

“That’s because it *is* perverted.” *I am not discussing this with an alien plant. I am not discussing fucking fetish shit with an alien plant.* “Why the fuck would you want to *do* this, anyway? We’re not even from the same *galaxy*. This can’t possibly turn you on!”

“What you might consider a perversion or a turn-on is, for me, more in the line of a fascination with the neurochemical responses your species has to certain stimulation. It’s like… oh, I met a terran who enjoyed making models of your cute little starships,” e said, stroking eir chin and thinking. “What did he call that? A hobby, yes, that’s the word!”

“Your hobby is… touching humans,” Nell said, staring up at em. *This can’t be real*. “That’s perverted.”

“Then I suppose I’m a pervert,” Andoa said equably. “Have you changed your mind about playing the game? Shall I see if Vella still has yet to find a terran to call her own?”

Nell stood there for a long minute. For some strange reason, the sheer ridiculousness of the conversation had sapped a great deal of the dread she’d been feeling. *I have to be careful*, she told herself. *I can’t let this thing lull me into a false sense of security. I’m fighting for my mind, for my freedom, and for the soul of the revolution*. “Fine,” Nell said. “I’ll play this perverted game of yours. But don’t expect to get a second round out of it.”

“That’s the spirit!” Andoa said, a dozen or more of eir vines snaking up into the lattice above. “Now, let’s get you ready.”

“What do you mean, rea–“ The vines leapt down from above, coiling around her with frightening speed. Two seized her arms, another two her legs, and the others her body, yanking her suddenly off her feet and into the air. “What the fuck?!”

“Don’t worry, little flower, I’m very practiced at this,” Andoa said, standing up. E walked over, trailing the vines leading to the ceiling behind em, and tapped another panel, a smaller one. A drawer slid out, and from it, e produced a small syringe. “If you feel any discomfort, any at all, even a little tingle like a limb is falling asleep, tell me immediately, understand? That’s not a loss condition for you, just a precaution for your safety.”

“Put me down!” Nell cried, struggling around the vines that held her limbs. She was splayed out in the air, parallel to the ground, her weight carefully balanced between the vines. All her struggling did was set herself gently rocking — the vines were far too strong for her to shift them.

“This is just part of the game,” Andoa explained, standing face-to-face with Nell. “I control all sensation you experience. You don’t get to touch yourself. You don’t get to touch anything else. Only *I* touch.”

“You didn’t say you were going to… to hang me from the ceiling!”

“If I didn’t, you’d be touching the ground. Is this your limit right now, Nell? Remember: this game only goes as long as you want it to, and there will always be other chances for you. Next time, you can come in knowing about the suspension aspect. We can do that with each and every step of the game, if you like.” E reached up and delicately cupped Nell’s cheek with eir enormous hand. “Or, you can trust me. I will never, *ever* do anything meant to harm you, and I will *always* stop when you ask for it.”

And somehow, even though she was hanging ten feet or more in the air, even though she was at the mercy of the monster that had invaded her world and was systematically dismantling the revolutionary state she'd helped to create, even though this very monster had once reached inside her head and fiddled with it over an insult — somehow, she believed the thing. Something about eir voice, the way eir smile fell away as e said it, maybe. She couldn't place it for certain, but she knew that it wasn't a lie.

What the fuck is happening to me? she thought. "Okay," she whispered through gritted teeth. *This is for the revolution.*

"Good. *Good*. Now relax. Remember, this is meant to be fun for you too, flower," Andoa said. "Otherwise, it's not a game, now is it?"

Nell's eyes darted to the syringe. "You said no drugs. What's that?"

"This?" Andoa lifted the syringe close. "This a Class-N xenodrug. It won't have any overt effects, it's simply an inhibitor that prevents certain neurochemical cascades. Specifically, orgasm."

"The fuck?!" Nell's heart leapt back into her throat. "What the fuck am I going to need that for? You didn't say shit about *sex*!"

"Nell, I have done with this a great many terrans," Andoa said patiently, "and one thing I have learned is that your species is capable of interpreting virtually any sensation as sufficiently pleasurable to trigger your arousal response. Not a lot of sophonts are like that, you know! You're very special, and for the record I think it's absolutely adorable. Unfortunately, if you *were* to orgasm, well…that would just end the game right there, no win for either of us — and please don't be offended, but I don't think you could hold out, certainly not the first time. *This* puts you in charge," e said, gesturing with the syringe. "The game goes as long as you want it to, and no longer. Do we stop now, or do we continue?"

This is for the revolution, Nell repeated to herself. "Do it," she whispered. She felt the pinch in her shoulder, and the rumbling noise that Andoa made.

"Good girl," e purred, removing the syringe and discarding it. "Now, we wait just a moment for it to work its way through your system. How are you feeling? Any discomfort, any tingling?"

Nell shook her head. "Unless you count being tied up by a giant alien plant pervert who's forcing me to play a ridiculous sex game for my freedom," she grumbled.

"Oh, no, that *definitely* doesn't count," Andoa said, letting out a soft chuckle. "I think it's been long enough, so, without any further ado–" E reached out with a vine and tapped a square section of the wall in front of Nell. Instead of opening, it lit up like a display, showing a set of two softly glowing concentric rings, the outermost of which slowly starting erasing itself running clockwise.

A timer, Nell realized.

“If you can endure that length of time without asking for the game to stop, flower,” Andoa said, eir vines slithering subtly as they held her, “you walk free today.” Another set of vines joined the ones holding her, tracing the lines of her body. She could feel the touch through her underlayer and thermal underwear, gentle and soft.

“How long is the timer?” *If this is all this is, I can ride this out easy*.

“Don’t worry about that, little one,” Andoa said. “Keep your head in the game.” E hooked a pair of vines beneath Nell’s shirt and thermal top and hiked them up, exposing her belly and back.

“H-hey!” Nell shouted. “What are you doing?”

“Giving you sensation, of course,” Andoa said, tracing delicate figures on Nell’s exposed skin with the furry, feathery tips of eir vines. It wasn’t a *tickle* per se, but Nell felt each stroke. It was as if someone were painting on her like a canvas, and though she tried to squirm, Andoa’s vines held her fast. “Oh, that’s a nice response,” e said.

“You never said you were going to strip me!” Nell protested.

“Well, how did you *think* I was going to stimulate you?” Andoa said, grinning. “Poke and prod you through your clothes the entire time? Come now, Nell, you don’t need an advantage *that* strong, do you? Let’s see that strength of will you’re so proud of — or do we go no further?” The vines withdrew momentarily.

“I didn’t say that!” *This is for the revolution.* “I’m not giving up!”

“*Yes*,” Andoa said, all six of eir eyes lighting up as the vines dove back in, expanding their reach, snaking further under Nell’s clothes to tease her along her arms, her thighs, her neck. “That’s what I love to hear!”

“Mmmfuck!” Nell gasped, clamping down with her teeth and only narrowly missing biting her tongue. *Don’t give up, don’t give up, don’t give up!* Something had changed in the way the vines were playing along her skin — it was still deliberate, precise, but occasionally there now came a *force*, a vine dragging across her skin, or lashing around a limb and squeezing gently before slipping away with a long, cruel brush. With the renewed attack came a warm, shuddering feeling from within, a gentle and pleasant cramping in her abdomen, and suddenly Nell understood exactly why she’d been given the shot.

Can I do this? she asked herself, staring past Andoa at the timer. She was already gasping for breath, and the bigger circle hadn’t even erased a quarter of itself yet. *How long has it been? A minute? Two minutes?* She could hold out. She had to hold out, even though this. *I can’t believe this fucking plant is actually getting me revved up*.

“How are you feeling, little one?” Andoa purred. “You’re a bit red in the face. I think you might be a bit warm, hmm?” E tugged Nell’s top higher up, over her breasts, letting it gather at her shoulders. “Is that better?” Now eir vines played over the newly exposed skin. More than merely reaching past it, they lingered, toyed with it, teased and pinched. One vine traced her collarbone with incredible delicacy. A long, sharp scratch ran down Nell’s back slowly,

starting between her shoulder blades and ending just above her tailbone, eliciting a sudden, extended cry of surprise.

“Y-you said no blood!” she stammered, shivering — but not from a chill.

“No blood, I promise,” Andoa said, peering over Nell’s back. “A nice, pretty scratch, but no blood. I told you, I know what I’m doing. Is that your limit, flower? Do we go no further?”

“Don’t you dare stop,” Nell hissed. The outer circle was ticking down. More than halfway done, now — had she lost track of that much time? “Don’t you *dare* stop! I’m walking out of here!”

“Oh, I chose well, didn’t I?” Andoa said, eir eyes flashing as streaks of gold swam through them. There was something truly beautiful in them, Nell thought, but before she could fall into those pretty depths, a vine wrapped itself around her head, acting as a blindfold. “Ah-ah-ah,” Andoa said in a scolding tone, “none of that. You stay right here with me, in the moment.”

“T-take it off!”

“No. I control sensation, and sight is a sensation — one I’ve decided not to give you, at least for now,” Andoa whispered in Nell’s ear. Being unable to see em, it was like e had simply *appeared* there, and Nell jerked in shock and let out an absolutely humiliating whimper. “Unless you *do* want to stop?”

This is for the revolution. “Fuck you,” Nell hissed. “Keep going!”

And e did. Nell’s skin became a tapestry of sensations, gentle and rough alike. She hadn’t been able to see much of it before, but now that she could see *nothing*, each touch became that much more shocking, that much more potent. Vines wrapped around her thighs and *squeezed*; thorns dragged gently over her ribs; feathery fronds teased the sensitive skin. More whimpers slipped through her lips. “I can’t… I can’t see the timer!” she gasped. “How long?!”

“Let’s take a little breather and check in,” Andoa said, and the vine around her eyes slipped away. The outer circle was perilously close to being gone, and Nell’s heart soared — she was so close, *so close*. She watched the last slivers of the circle tick away, laughing.

I’ve got you, you plant bastard, she thought, as the last of the circle vanished. A small chunk of the inner circle disappeared along with it, and the outer circle sprang back into being, ticking down slowly once more. Nell’s eyes widened, and the pit of her stomach dropped out from under her. *No*, she thought. *No, that’s not– No!*

“How are you feeling? Any tingling, any discomfort?” E paused, leaning in close and cupping Nell’s cheek again. “Petal, you’re crying. What’s wrong?”

“Huh?” Nell looked up at Andoa, blurry and indistinct, and realized that tears were streaming from her eyes. “Fuck…”

“Do we need to stop? There will always be another round for you.”

Nell squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. “I just thought– I thought that the outer circle was all. I thought I was done.”

“Aaah,” Andoa said softly. “No, my dear, that’s just a five minute sweep to make it easier for you to track.”

“Five minutes?!” *That was only five minutes?!* she thought, despair welling up inside her.

“Five minutes. It’s an easy amount of time to keep track of, but not so short that it doesn’t draw out the anticipation a little. Have we reached your limit, little one?” E stroked Nell’s hair gently. “This game can be very trying for beginners. Do we need to stop?”

Nell took a deep breath, swallowed, and let it out, squeezing down on her fear. *I can do this*, she told herself. *I can walk out of here free today, and that’s what I’m going to do. And once I do, this thing will want me back. Fine. I’m going to make the bastard wager more and more on this stupid game, and I’m going to win then too. I’ll free* everyone*, make them let us go, make them leave us alone. This thing is the Captain — stupid of it to give me leverage like this!* “Keep going,” she breathed.

“…alright,” Andoa said. “But if I see that heartbroken look in your eyes again again, flower, we’re stopping. I’m not going to hurt you, not for any reason. Understood?”

Nell nodded, and glared right at Andoa. “Fuck you. I’m not done yet.”

“Aaaah,” Andoa said, grinning and pinching Nell’s cheek. “There’s that revolutionary spirit!” Every single vine holding onto her body squeezed, and the assault began anew, all the more intense for the brief reprieve Nell had been given. Vines stripped her top, deftly trading places to keep her arms immobilized even as they briefly slipped loose to allow the sodden, sweaty clothes to pass. Something hooked under the straps of her bra and, with a bit of force, seemed to cut clean through them; another vine jerked it away and let her breasts hang free.

Nell had endured what came before, but it hadn’t prepared her for what the Captain would do to her more sensitive parts. It started with vines coiling around them, one of eir thinner vines gently flicking one nipple and tearing a shocked yelp from deep in her throat. Something roughly textured passed slowly over it next, sending a shiver throughout her body. Nell bit down on her lip to try to ride it out, but another vine deftly separated her jaws and gently teased her lip free. “None of that, now, flower,” Andoa said in a throaty whisper. “Wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself.” Even the vine on her lip tingled, and she bore down helplessly with her thighs, finding only empty air and the tension of Andoa’s vines between them.

Stay strong, she told herself. *You can do this*.

Fists clenched (until Andoa’s vines spread her fingers wide), she rode the wave, gasping and whimpering as Andoa teased her. When she thought she might finally be on the verge of her tormented nipple going numb from overstimulation, Andoa switched seamlessly to the other, starting the process all over again. Other vines began to tug at her trousers, but she was too focused on enduring the sharper sensations to struggle against it — not that it would have

made a difference. Soon, she felt cool, fresh air on her thighs, and yet more vines began to tickle, to stroke, to scrape, to scratch here and there, never quite giving her a moment of respite between them. Nell's eyes were fixed on the timer's slow sweep, almost as hypnotic to her now as Andoa's eyes — slowly, the circle shaved itself away, until at last it vanished and was reborn again, the inner circle further truncated in a sudden jolt.

One more down, she told herself as she moaned out loud, full-throated and helpless to stop herself. *You can do this*.

Andoa's vines rolled her over, settling her into a new position facing the ceiling, her feet pulled back close to her buttocks and her back gently arched. Her arms were pinned back as if she were stretching. The vines still supported her weight evenly — if she wasn't so stars-damned keyed-up, she could rest comfortably like this. "There we are," Andoa said, stroking her sides with eir hands. "I thought it might be time for a new position. Can you guess my favorite feature of this one?" E chuckled, and with a gentle *thwack* one of eir vines slapped Nell's ass. She gasped, squirmed, and immediately felt the vine running between her thighs. Pressed up against her nethers, whenever she struggled–

Oh no, no, I can't– She was sweaty, desperately sucking down air, her nerves jangling with deep, almost painful need across her entire body. Nell squeezed her eyes shut. *No. You can do this. You can do this!* "Is that– is that all you got?" she managed to whimper, taking a short, gasping breath between each word.

"No, my dear sweet Nell," Andoa purred, running a finger down her breastbone, between her breasts, across her stomach, and– "I'm only just getting started."

And the worst part was, E was right. What had come before, even though it had driven Nell right to the edge of self-control, was warm-up at best for what happened next. Andoa employed new textures, new techniques, new senations with such alacrity and such finesse that she could never quite grow used to one or the other. One moment, something would be rasping along her back; the next, a delicate, cool little vine would tease her lips. Something prickled, sharp little pokes all in a line, along one ass cheek, and in its wake came a feathery tickle. Vines squeezed her breasts, pinched the delicate skin of her inner thighs, even traced the contours of her ears.

Another sweep down. How many more to go? Somewhere, distantly, she understood why the timer had no numbers — she could read it easily even when she was upside down.

And every time a sensation surprised her, every time something new dug into her or something faded into the background long enough for her to forget about it, she squirmed — and whenever she squirmed, the vine between her thighs ensured it was the worst, most terrible kind of ecstacy. She felt the familiar old pressure building inside her, a flood pounding against the levee, always threatening to overtop it, but held in check by the xenodrugs the Captain had given her. *It's too much,* she thought in the space between whimpers. It was growing, and growing, and *growing*, but it never quite broke free — and it never became old, became stale. Andoa's vines and fingers were far too cunning, far too deft, far too practiced to ever allow the tension, the building pressure, the *need* to lapse. She watched another sweep tick down, her gasps and moans merging into a single, sinusoidal sound of exquisite misery.

Hold on. Any thoughts more complicated than that were beyond her now. *Hold on. Just hold on*. There was no real sense of what Nell was holding on *for*, why she couldn't simply beg for it all to stop — she just knew she *couldn't*, somehow. That part of her was dwindling, though, as more and more of her attention, her experience, was consumed by sheer sensation. The part of Nell that felt, that needed, that was whimpering helplessly in the vines of an alien, was growing stronger. *Hold on!* Nell told herself. *Not much longer!* Her eyes rolled as she tried to find the timer, but she could scarcely separate light from dark.

"Please," she heard herself whimper. *Hold on!*

"Yes, pet?" Andoa's voice was soft, close. Every single vine on her body squeezed, pinched, rasped, scratched, prodded, tickled. Nell let out a loud, seemingly unending moan. "Do you need something?"

"….need it," Nell whimpered. "Please…" *I can't!*

"Are we finished, little one? I need you to say it," Andoa said, running half a dozen feathery vines across her chest. Somewhere in the loud cry that Nell let out was a yes. She instantly felt something prick near her collarbone, and something cool began to spread throughout her. The vines all slackened at once, and she felt a terrifying moment of free-fall before Andoa caught her in eir arms, pulling her close to eir fuzzy, mossy body. "Good girl, Nell," e purred in her ear. "Now, come for me."

The flood crested. The dam burst. Everything that had been held back, all the need and desire and frustration and torment *exploded* in a wave that swept Nell's thoughts away. Her back arched and her kegels clamped down involuntarily as she shuddered in Andoa's arms, the soft, almost fluffy green seeming to enfold her. She made a noise that surely the entire ship heard, her fingers scrabbling in Andoa's fronds and seizing twin fistfuls of them as her entire body jerked in the throes of orgasm. The wave finally, blessedly plateaued, and she rode that high for a long time, moaning and whimpering as relief slowly quenched the conflagration inside her.

And all the while, Andoa was whispering in her ear: "Good girl, *Good girl*. Oh, I'm so proud of you, Nell, *so* proud! I've *never* had a terran go that long their first time! What a perfect, amazing, incredible little creature you are!" Dimly, she became aware of a straw being tucked between her lips. "Drink," Andoa said, and she obeyed without thinking. A sour juice, just sweet enough to be palatable, rushed into her mouth, cool and refreshing as she swallowed it. "Good girl." Andoa's fronds and mosses never seemed to stop moving, brushing gently up against Nell's skin as she came down, setting off little micro-orgasmic aftershocks as her brain struggled to process the input.

And slowly, Nell began to realize what she'd done. She stared up at the frozen timer, eyes finally focusing, saw the half-erased sweep and the heavily truncated inner circle, less than a third of it left. *I could have made it*, she told herself, but she knew it was a lie, and she began to weep.

"Oh, flower, shhh," Andoa said, squeezing Nell gently. "Don't worry, little one, don't worry. You can try as many times as you need to, remember?" E began to gently stroke Nell's hair with one hand, gently turning her so e could look down into her eyes. "You will always have

another chance, as long as you want it. Though, I might have to extend the timer a little sooner than I usually do," e added, laughing. "You're too good at this!'

"Fuck you," Nell mumbled, burying her red-cheeked face in Andoa's indescribably soft moss.

"We just got done doing that, pet." E stood up, still gently stroking Nell. "Let's get you cleaned up. All that sweat can't be comfortable, can it?"

Nell realized she was shivering, and not just from the aftereffects of the world-shattering orgasm she'd just experienced — she was drenched with sweat, and her hair was lank and plastered to her skull. "Here?"

"No, silly," Andoa said, reaching out with a vine and tapping a panel, which sank into the wall and slid to reveal an open doorway. "I'm taking you to the bath. No struggling, alright? I won fair and square."

"Fuck you," Nell repeated. "Wanna go again. I'll win this time."

"I appreciate the spirit, but you need to recover," Andoa said as they passed through a common room that was as covered in mossy plants and ferns as Andoa emself was. "This is a big strain on your body, and we can't just keep doing it, much as I'd love to. We'll see how you're feeling in a couple of days, alright?"

"Nnnnnn." Nell grumped and let her eyes slide shut. She *was* tired. Exhausted, really. She heard water filling a tub, felt warm steam rising through the air. *So you lost round one*, she told herself. *Fine. You were at a disadvantage. You didn't know the terrain, you came in malnourished and tired. It was never a fair contest. Save your strength. Recover. Next time, we win. Then, it's back to the plan — we force the bastard to wager more and more until we're all free*.

She very pointedly shoved to the back of her mind the one inconvenient thought that, Nell thought, might undermine the entire enterprise: *No man ever got me off like that*.

Chapter End Notes

At long last, after being very patient, Andoa finally gets to cut loose. Eagerly anticipating the Discourse in the comments about precisely how dub the con was in this chapter of a dub-con fic in a dub-con setting. (I just wanna write lewd plant porn, y'all.)

And remember, folks, suspension bondage may be really, really hot, but it's also super dangerous, so leave it to the professionals!

Chapter 18: Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

> For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

> In which– I'm sorry, this just in... apparently people *like smut*? Well, gotta give the people what they want!
> Content warning for: Dysphoria and especially face-altering-app-induced dysphoria in the first bit. Heavy petting and grinding with very lightly implied genitals in the last bit (top PoV).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cass became slowly aware of the room around her: the trickling of the mirrorfall, the artificial calls of nonexistent birds, the false sunrise leaking gentle ambient light down into the clearing that made up Leah's bedroom. There were other things, too, like the weight of Leah's head on her arm, or the warmth of her body as Cass spooned up against her, and the floral scent of her hair. A hairline scar on her arm, only visible when the butterflies drifted by at the right angle, stood out, perhaps the legacy of some surgery the Affini had done. She was breathing softly, still fast asleep, and she felt very good to hold onto.

Nothing had woken Cass up; she'd simply come to consciousness. Was it the old I-have-work-to-do reflex, honed over years in the bunker at Bulwark? It was odd, waking up in room straight out of faerie stories, but Cass had to admit that it was both lovely and suited Leah very well — an unusual, ethereal princess from another realm, indeed. She gently extracted her arm from under Leah, smoothly replacing it with one of the many extremely fluffy pillows that surrounded them, and climbed out of bed. The crimson nightdress swished around her thighs as she stood.

Right. The dress. Well, that was one thing she could take care of, if it was still as early as the dawnlit sky above indicated. She padded in bare feet to the hanging vines that served as a door to Leah's room, as flower-laden as everything else in Polyphylla's hab, and brushed her way through them. The common room was empty and silent, lit in the same shade of light. *Perfect*, Cass thought, as she crossed to the kitchen nook. The floor here was a smooth sheet of rock, and while the layout was recognizably a kitchen, everything was as blended in with naturalistic aesthetic as the rest of the hab was. Instead of a countertop, there was a boulder with a flat surface nestled behind the broad tree; instead of appliances, a cliff face shot

through with roots. She could make out shapes, but had no idea what anything was. “Hab?” she whispered.

“Hey cutie,” it responded. “Why are we whispering?”

Cass sighed. *Of course Polyphylla has the hab AI set to floret mode.* “So we don’t wake anyone up,” she replied. “Obviously.”

“Gotcha! Anything I can do for you?”

“Where’s your compiler?” One part of the rock face vibrated gently. “Okay, good. Now, can you talk to other hab AIs?”

“Sure can!”

“Great. Contact the hab that belongs to Tsuga Sequi, Eighth Bloom, and check the compiler records. There should be a tank top and slacks; print me one of each.”

“You got it, cutie. Coming right up!” The compiler began to vibrate gently again, and Cass let out a relieved sigh — she’d half expected the thing to refuse her on the grounds that the chosen clothing was insufficiently cute.

“I see you’re an early riser.” Cas whirled — Polyphylla was standing behind her, at the entrance to the kitchen nook, arms crossed, vines gently coiling and uncoiling. “And very clever about using the complier.”

“And I see that you’re better at sneaking up on people than I gave you credit for,” Cass replied. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, willing her heart to calm down.

“I thought we were going to pick out a wardrobe for you together.” There was an air of disappointment, but not frustration, to her voice.

“I don’t need help picking out clothes,” Cass said. “I never agreed to that, anyway.” The compiler chimed, and after a moment of experimentation Cass figured out how to open the panel and retrieve the fresh clothes. “You get *one* dress-up adventure, and it’s officially over.”

“Well, we’ll see about that,” Polyphylla said. “One might be sufficient, though.” She cracked her chest open and retrieved a tablet — somehow, her talent for looking human made it a grislier sight than when Tsuga did it, and Cass shuddered. “I was able to identify several clear sources of dysphoria for you, though of course I’ll need you to check those over — preferably, while it’s still fresh in your mind.”

Cass paused halfway through pulling on her trousers. “Are you telling me,” she said, “that this entire dress bullshit was *intended* to make me feel shitty about myself?”

“Of course it wasn’t,” Polyphylla said. “I thought you’d like it, and I was admittedly curious about the boundary state of your preferences vis a vis masculine and feminine presentation. It would have been a moderately useful data point for the psyche map I’m going to put together as part of your wardship. But *then* you had a dysphoric reaction, and I realized that I could potentially eliminate a major source of noise for that project *and* a major source of

discomfort for you at the same time with relative ease. I know it was unpleasant for you, and I'm very sorry about that, but it'll lead to a *much* better quality of life for you in the future."

"How the *fuck* does making me miserable help anyone?" Cass snapped.

"One has to observe an issue before one can correct it," Polyphylla said calmly. "Otherwise you're just guessing and hoping for the best, and I don't work that way. And don't curse, I don't want you to be in the habit of doing that around Leah."

"My emotions are *not* some kind of weird experimental subject for you," Cass said, glaring and pulling the dress up over her shoulders and tossing it away. The tank top went on, and she felt a little more normal. "Where's my jacket? You didn't recycle it, did you?"

"Of course I didn't recycle it," Polyphylla said, tapping away at her tablet. "You'd clearly put a lot of work and care into it. It's on a shelf. I can get it for you if we go out. Here, look over this and tell me what you think." She offered the tablet to Cass, and though it was like holding a family vidscreen, it was lightweight enough not to be too cumbersome.

"What the hell is–" For a brief and awful moment, Cass thought Polyphylla had somehow dug up a photo of her mother, but then she realized what she was looking at. On the screen was Cass, but *not* Cass. She was wearing the red dress, but it *looked right* on her, somehow. It took a moment for her to puzzle out just what she was seeing. Slimmer shoulders. Thicker thighs and hips. A narrower rib cage. A jawline that wasn't quite so sharp. The Cass on the screen was still very recognizably Cass, but more feminine, maybe a little younger-looking. "What is this?" she said, her voice emerging just above a whisper.

"A preliminary model for your preferred shape," Polyphylla said, kneeling down next to Cass. "You can change it however you want. There's several different interfaces for you to influence it with, and don't worry, I have a backup saved in case you can't find your way back to this."

"How did you–?" She couldn't push herself to finish the sentence. Her unreal reflection had its fingers around her heart, and it was clenching for all its life.

"Microexpressions, temperature changes, kinesthetics, various other factors," Polyphylla said. "Very easy to spot, once you know what to look for. Using those observations, I was able to create a rough map of your psyche as pertains to your dysphoria, and using that map, I created that model." She tapped the tablet gently with a vine.

Cass swallowed, trying to force her emotions back down her throat. *Do not let her break you like this*. "You watched me for five minutes and you figured all this out?"

"Well, as I said, it's only a preliminary model," Polyphylla said. "That's why I wanted to get your input on it."

"What the fuck is the point of this?" Cass whispered, her eyes starting to well up. "I don't… I don't need to see this weird, idealized version of myself!" She forced her eyes away from the screen — as much it hurt to look, she couldn't help but want to stare endlessly at it — and glared up at Polyphylla. "Why would you think I'd want to see something I can't ever *be*?"

“But you *can*,” Polyphylla said, her voice gentle and, Cass supposed, intended to be soothing. “We’ll put you on an appropriate regimen of Class-Gs, and over a few months your body will respond, and you’ll come out looking like that, or, well, however you *do* want to look. It’s really very simple. Leah certainly didn’t look the way she does now when I first met her.”

Cass blinked the tears out of her eyes. “… you can just *do* that?”

“Of course. *Easily*. If you’re comfortable with surgeries, we can even push things well beyond what you would consider the terran norm. My primary concern right now is simply correcting your dysphoria, by correcting the aspects of your body that produce it. I appreciate that it was uncomfortable for you,” Polyphylla said. “And I am really *very* sorry for that. But a little discomfort now has yielded a *much* quicker path to greater overall discomfort reduction.”

“You could have *asked*,” Cass hissed. “Instead of… of *that*.”

“It might have influenced your reactions if you knew I was observing them,” Polyphylla said. “I understand that it was likely a very hard experience, but please don’t worry. Once you add whatever details you want to that model, I’ll send it off to Arvense and he’ll come up with a Class-G cocktail tailored to your specifications, and then I’ll erase the entire experience from your memory. You’ll have all the cure and none of the hurt!”

The tablet slipped through Cass’s fingers and fell to the ground with a surprisingly soft *clink*. “The *fuck* you are!”

“Language,” Polyphylla reminded her. “And Cass, please don’t be afraid of it. I’m a professional. I do this sort of thing all the time. The edits will be absolutely seamless! You’ll remember your cute overnight snuggle with Leah just fine — the dress will simply fall right out of the memory. Oh, and I’ll have to edit this conversation, too. Hmm. I suppose I’ll make it about breakfast. What *would* you like for breakfast? If we actually talk about it, it’ll be much easier to anchor your memories to that.”

“You stay out of my head and you stay away from me,” Cass growled, backing away. “Don’t even come *near* me!”

“…I’m confused,” Polyphylla said. “You *want* to hold onto an uncomfortable experience?”

“I *want* my mind to remain unfucked with!” Cass said. “Why would you possibly think I’d be okay with you *rewriting my memory?*”

Polyphylla looked down at Cass for a long moment, then affected a sigh and settled to the floor — it was less an action of sitting than simply letting her legs collapse and spread out like a long, swishy skirt. “I can see we have some work to do,” she said. “If you don’t trust me, it’s going to make this entire process much less pleasant for both of us. You’ll be miserable, and I’ll be constantly having to adjust the data to account for it as I construct your psyche map.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t just plan on casually rewriting peoples’ brains whenever it’s convenient for you!” Cass’s eyes darted around the kitchen nook. There had to be a way out,

a way past her. *Maybe, if I can get up on that counter, I can slip through those vines…* No, by the time she climbed up, Polyphylla would already be on her.

“There is nothing casual about what I do,” Polyphylla retorted. “I’m not simply poking my vines in your skull and rearranging neurons at random. I have been working with terrans since before we even understood how your species’ neurology functions. I was involved, in a small way, in helping develop our models for mapping terran psyches in the first place. I know what I’m doing, Cass. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be an accredited terran xenopsychology specialist, I wouldn’t be serving aboard the *Tillandsia*, and I certainly wouldn’t be taking care of Leah — she required a tremendous amount of deep psychological reconstruction and still requires significant maintenance.”

“You are *not* winning me over by talking about how you took a person and completely reconfigured *who they are*,” Cass said. “I’ve spent enough time with her to know that, whatever you did, it broke whoever she used to be.”

“She was broken long before I started treating her,” Polyphylla said quietly. She had gone rigid again, like she had the day before, transforming in an instant from a nurturing (albeit inhuman and creepy) caregiver to a terrifying predator. “And not by one of us. You don’t know what you’re talking about, and I will not have you talk about my Leah like that.”

Cass shivered, but stood her ground. “Then stop treating me like I’m not a person and *explain* things before you do them!”

“You want explanations? Very well. You understanding the methodology and my initial evaluation of your psyche will contaminate the data less than this degree of mistrust.” She softened, but only slightly. “Over the course of your wardship, I will be constructing a very detailed map of your psyche, consisting of various mnemonic landmarks that influence your baseline personality. Do you understand? I am simplifying the technical language significantly, but so long as you understand the base concept, we can continue.”

Cass nodded, relaxing ever so slightly. *Don’t let your guard down.* “Sure. I get it.”

“Based on what I know of you, both from speaking to and observing you as well as data collected about you both here on the ship and by Neoxenoveterinary Archeobureacracy, my current evaluation of you is that you have developed a highly feral persona that makes it difficult for you to mesh well with Affini. Tsuga seems to be the exception, given her relatively lax style of xeno care, which, while I’m certain is more comfortable for you in your present state, does nothing to address the underlying problem.”

“That being the ‘feral personality,’” Cass said bitterly. “Not wanting to be conquered and having my life managed for me, in other words.”

“More in the vein of being unwilling to accept guidance from an obviously more advanced species that specializes in caring for sophonts such as yourself,” Polyphylla replied. “Part of the issue is ideological; that can be ameliorated through time and experience. The real issue is the underlying tendency, which is anchored to an as-yet-unknown mnemonic landmark or landmarks. Part of my work during this wardship will be to determine what those landmarks are, how difficult they’ll be to shift or otherwise ameliorate, and whether doing so will

require domestication. There are other issues, but as of now I believe that's your chief stumbling block to integration."

"Integration meaning 'be a good little pet and do what you're told,'" Cass growled. "The 'guidance' you offer is incompatible with basic dignity, basic freedoms!"

"What we offer is what you deserve," Polyphylla said, finally relaxing her shape. "What you cannot provide for yourselves, what you deny to yourselves, what you *need*. Freedom, as you understand the term, is meaningless if you aren't free from scarcity, from essential needs being unmet, from being *alone* in the universe."

"And being given the world on a silver platter is meaningless," Cass replied, "if the price you have to pay is your soul."

Polyphylla sighed, or at least, made the right sounds and gestures to *look* like she was sighing. "Cass, I don't want your soul. I don't want to change who you are. I simply want to help you embrace the Compact. We're not going away — we would *never* abandon you like that. You know that." She extended an open hand, palm up, as if to make an offering. "I want to give you whatever help you need to be the best possible *you* that you can be. Can we please work towards that together?"

"Not if you're going to take that as an excuse to do whatever you want," Cass said, not moving.

"If I pledge not to enthrall or otherwise fascinate you without informing you of my intentions first, and to discuss any alterations I feel are necessary with you in advance, will that suffice?"

"I don't *need* alterations," Cass spat.

"You may not," Polyphylla replied. "And if that's the case, I will be very pleased. But I *must* check; I'm bound to do so by the terms of the wardship. It's my responsibility to ensure that you aren't a threat to yourself, others, or the community. In a way, this is what *you* used to do for your people. I just have better tools to do it with."

Cass glared at Polyphylla, then shifted her gaze to the tablet, still laying on the floor. "Take that away. I don't want it."

She reached down and picked up the tablet. "I understand that my methodology was–"

"No," Cass interrupted. "Forget the methodology. *I don't want it*. I made my peace with my body and who I am a long time ago. Does it hurt sometimes? Yeah. But a little pain can be useful — like right now." The smile she gave Polyphylla was not a kind one. "If I can be miserable, then I know I'm still *me*. If you were going to scramble my brain, that'd be the first thing you'd fix, wouldn't it?"

"I don't *scramble brains*," Polyphylla said, her irritation obvious. "But fine. For now. I don't like simply leaving you with this lingering trauma, but if it gets us past this obstacle, I'll defer treatment. I'm still going to keep this data. After the wardship is over, regardless of the

outcome, I'll transfer it to your data vault, and you — or your new owner, if you have one — can do with it what you like."

"There's not going to be an owner in the picture."

"You'd be surprised how often I've heard that from future florets," Polyphylla said. "As to this absurd fixation you have on 'still being you,' I need you to–" She paused, a riffle running through her vines, and she suddenly stood up. "Leah's awake. We'll have to have this argument another time." She moved faster than Cass had ever seen an Affini move as she left her standing alone in the kitchen.

She took a deep breath and let her mind wander, thinking over what had just happened, processing it and filing it away, giving each word, each statement its due consideration. *There's a way through this*, she thought. *The same way there's a way through a minefield. Now I just have to find it.*

Polyphylla's bathroom maintained the same forest aesthetic as the rest of her hab, with only a slight list to the utilitarian. The floor was paved in textured stones, square, of equal size, almost like normal tile. The bath itself was just as absurdly massive as Tsuga's, lined with soft mosses, and already full of steaming water when Polyphylla escorted Cass and Leah inside.

"Alright, so, where's the shower?" Cass said, peering curiously at a tree with a broad flower that might have been a disguised shower head.

"A shower won't get you nearly as clean as a good bath," Polyphylla said. "Besides, you're so full of tension, a nice hot soak will do you good." Her vines dipped down and neatly stripped the nightdress from Leah's body.

Cass looked away quickly. *Right in front of me, without even asking her,* she thought. "Okay, fine. If you don't have a shower, I'll take the bath second." She started walking for the door, but a vine reached out to block her. At least it didn't *grab* her.

"Cass, this is part of your evaluation," Polyphylla said, her voice stern but gentle. "I have to ensure that you're capable of taking care of yourself, and that includes hygiene."

"So you want to watch me strip off and wash," Cass said, crossing her arms. "And if I say no?"

"Then you get a bath anyway, but without me asking nicely," Polyphylla replied, "and I make a note of it in your evaluation."

Cass heard Leah let out a giggle just before a big *splash*. "Cassie~!" she called. "Come on and join me!"

She felt her face grow warm. "You're *naked*."

"Yeah, and you're not. Hurry up!" More splashing sounds ensued.

Cass's jaw was beginning to ache from the clenching — when had she started doing that? She shook her head to clear it. *She's just going to throw you in if you don't* get *in.* "We're going to have to have a talk about boundaries," she said, peeling off her tank top and tossing it aside. "This wardship thing doesn't make me your property."

"I'm well aware of that," Polyphylla replied. "Nevertheless, you need to bathe, and I need to evaluate your ability to do so. If it helps, I've been naked the entire time you've known me," she added in a lighthearted tone.

"Ha ha," Cass grumbled, shedding her trousers, then her underthings. *Fine. If this is what they want, give it to them. This is how you get through the minefield. You've dealt with worse things than being naked in front of people.* Like Intake, when she'd arrived on Solstice. She'd been naked then, sure, but it had nevertheless been worse. She pushed that memory down and turned to face the bath, trying to quash her feelings of anxiety and guilt in a like fashion. The water was hot, but not uncomfortably so, as she stepped in and found her footing. The rock inside the bath was textured as well, and the moss was firm enough to cushion the edges. She sat and leaned back against it, letting out a long, slow breath. It did actually feel pretty good.

"Hey~" Leah said, the steaming waters hiding very little of her body as she waded up to Cass. She looked away again, focusing on a knot in a (fake?) tree on the far side of the room. "Oh *wow*," Leah said, staring directly at the looping scar that ran across Cass's shoulder. "How'd *that* happen?"

"A man came at me with a knife," Cass said, squelching the smoky, firelit memory. "I walked away. He didn't."

"So…" Leah blinked, and stared for a moment, her eyes glazing over. Yet another subject that made her tune out. "Huh? Oh *wow*, that's a–"

"Leah, flower, don't pry, it's not polite," Polyphylla said, her vines gently curling around Leah. "Let's get you cleaned up."

"Okay!" Leah said, dropping the subject instantly and looking back up at Polyphylla expectantly. "The good shampoo?"

Polyphylla smiled. "If that got in the water, petal, Cass would have a very bad time, wouldn't she?"

"Oooh, right," Leah said, looking back at Cass and frowning. "I'm sorry you don't get to use the good stuff! It's soooo nice!"

"It's infused with Class-A xenodrugs," Polyphylla explained.

"Ah, yeah, let's avoid that," Cass said. "Sorry," she added to Leah. "I know you like those. I really am fine waiting for the bath, if you want to use them."

"No no no, it's okay," Leah said, pressing herself up against Cass. "You're here! That's even better." The warm water made the touch less frustrating — everything was wet, slippery, less

grating — but the fact that Leah was naked added an entirely new level of awkwardness to it. She was keenly aware of the sensation of Leah's breasts gliding across her skin.

I can't believe she's doing this, Cass thought, caught between marveling and being horrified at the blasé way Leah treated nudity — and quickly crossing her legs. *Stop that, stop that, stop that,* she thought, willing it to go down with only moderate success. *Fucking third puberty.*

The rest of the bath went much the same — Leah would flirt with her, be interrupted by Polyphylla to have one part of her or another lathered and rinsed, only to to return for yet more flirting. The only respite came when Polyphylla began to work on Leah's hair, a complex process involving several brushes, no less than five bottles of product, and a solid fifteen minutes of scalp massage. Cass made the best of it, scrubbing herself down with a loofah and a sweet-smelling body wash before borrowing one of Leah's shampoos and quickly doing her own hair. It came out fuller and more lustrous than it had been in years — whatever was in that shampoo worked.

It also came out smelling like Leah, which Cass both very much enjoyed and was deeply frustrated by. *I'm going to have to figure out where I stand with her*, she thought as she toweled herself off. *And then convince her to accept it*. She still felt as if it would be taking advantage of a girl who was barely there. Leah may have been aggressive about her flirting, but was that really *her*, or something Polyphylla had put in her head? Judging by what Polyphylla had said earlier that morning, it was entirely possible that *none* of Leah was really her. If Polyphylla was as good as she said she was, and the work Leah had endured was really so extensive, wasn't it possible that "Leah" was a fully constructed mind riding around in a body that didn't belong to it, a body whose native intelligence had been erased in favor of something more satisfyingly adorable by Affini standards?

The disquiet lingered long after the bath, when Leah took her by the arm and dragged her to what was apparently her favorite patch of flowers, soft and admittedly comfortable, from which they could look up at a gap in the branches at the false sky overhead. It really was a good mimicry of a natural sky, with interestingly shaped clouds rolling by at regular intervals that Leah delighted in finding various objects and animals in. Rather than argue with her about how many legs a horse was supposed to have, she kept turning the thought over in her head: *If I don't make it through the minefield, this might be what I come out like*. She wasn't a Cliff — she wasn't going to just settle down and open up a restaurant or something and happily accept being owned. They'd reach in deep and truly scramble her brains, and build something entirely new out of what was left. Polyphylla would probably take pride in doing it herself, and make of her that femme-y Cass from the tablet.

She couldn't help but shudder. How long was it going to be before she could get that image to drop out of her head, a week? A month? Or would it be one of those miserable scars that still resurfaced years later, bubbling up unwanted at two in the morning when she was trying to sleep? *Nothing hurts worse*, she thought, *than something you want and can't have*.

Even when she was younger, she couldn't pull it off. She'd worked out how to wear a hijab properly, and the basics of makeup, but that was it — and all of it self-taught, since her mother hadn't been around to help her. Not that her mother been terribly feminine, anyway,

Cass reminded herself, but she was raised with it, and at least knew how to fake it. Cass didn't even have that, and having the right body wouldn't magically teach her all the things she'd never been allowed to learn.

This was taking a turn. Her thoughts were beginning to spiral, the clouds completely forgotten, Leah's warmth next to her distant and unconcerning. She didn't think about her mother often, and this was why — it was so hard to pull up out of out of this emotional nosedive. *God*, *why are we like this?* she thought. *You made my mother like this, and You made me just like her. We just can't leave well enough alone. And look what happened to us. Look what happened to Papa, he lost* both *of us. Why would You make us this way if this was all that was going to–*

She was ripped from her wallowing by a pressure on her leg, as Leah rolled over and straddled it. She looked down at Cass, lower lip seized firmly between her teeth, leaning over her with her arms to either side of Cass.

"Leah?" she whispered. *Oh God, does she want to–*

When Leah's lips came down, soft and ready, and when the weight of her pressed down all across Cass, and when her fresh and floral scent enveloped her, every thought in Cass's head suddenly became so much less important. Her third puberty roared back to life, dragging her up from the depths of mourning with a fierce need. She could feel herself pressing into Leah's thigh, and Leah in turn pressing into hers — softer, gentler, but no less insistent.

Are we really doing this? she thought, her arms reaching up to encircle Leah's delicate body and press her close. She kissed Leah back, her tongue parting wet lips, slipping past teeth to find Leah's own. She pulled a soft whimper from Leah, and it sent a thrill rippling through Cass's body. *How long has it been since I've made someone make that noise?*

She knew she shouldn't do this. It was wrong in every way. And yet, at the same time, she *needed* it. She needed one good thing to exist in the disturbing world that had displaced the one she knew. She needed to be able to give herself to someone without worrying that her soul itself would be signed over with it. In this moment, that meant she needed Leah.

Fuck it, she thought, clamping her thighs around Leah's leg and rolling over to pin her against the flowerbed. Now it was her weight on Leah's, her hands running through Leah's hair as they kissed. She won more whimpers, even a moan as Leah shivered and squeezed Cass's thigh between hers. This was how Cass liked it, in the driver's seat and gazing down at a gorgeous woman losing herself in her arms. She was good at this, at least, good at giving pleasure. She could touch, and read in the eyes and the hear in the cries of her lover the joy that came of it, and in so doing claim a little of that joy for herself. Leah's skin didn't try to crawl off her body, even when the touch was good, so Cass touched her, a stroke on the cheek, a nibble where her neck met her shoulder, and *God* her skin was so smooth and soft. How was it possible for a girl this perfect to exist?

"Aaah!" Her lips freed, Leah found her voice, letting out a loud call of wild abandon as Cass's teeth traced the line of her collarbone, her left hand stroking slowly up her side before cupping and squeezing her breast ever so gently. A test and nothing more — "More!" Leah whimpered, barely understandable as a word, but Cass spoke several languages, and this was

one of them. While her left hand continued its work, seeking the tenderest spots it could through the fabric of Leah's dress, her right hand made a long, slow journey down Leah's side, pausing as her fingers drummed gently against her ass through her skirt. She made herself meet Leah's eyes, saw in them the pleading, and saw in her nod permission given.

Under the skirt the hand went, sliding up Leah's impossibly soft thigh to cup one ass cheek, squeezing it between her fingers and drawing a squeal that set Cass on fire from the inside out, the old familiar burning deep in her gut. Her fingers found a rapidly-firming nub on Leah's breast and seized on it, gently pinching and rolling it — more moans, more shivers, and even an arching of the back. *Oh, she likes that*, Cass thought, licking her lips and running her tongue back up along Leah's collarbone. *She* likes *that*.

On it went, Cass teasing the squirming, whimpering girl beneath her. The sound of her ecstasy was intoxicating, the heat it sparked in her building ever higher. Thoughts of propriety were out the airlock — all she could think of, in this moment, was Leah. Every mote of her attention was focused on her, on her expression, on her shivering, on the pleading stare in her eyes. There was something deep inside her, Cass could see, something aching to be touched, something utterly lost in the joy of *being* touched. That, for a moment, shook her, as it touched something deep inside herself — a kinship she denied with another vigorous squeeze of Leah's ass. Cass rode the squeak she made far from the ghost of an unpleasant thought.

The hab spoke up just after Cass earned another series of body-wracking shudders from Leah, and as the fingers of her right hand began to tease at the waistband of Leah's panties: "Hey cutie, you've got a visitor~!" Cass bolted upright and froze, the oh-shit-I've-been-caught instinct racing up the back of her spine before her brain knew what was happening.

Under her, Leah shivered and let out one last, long moan of delight that trailed off into slow, languid laughter. "Wow," she said, a grin plastered across her face. She looked much like she did when she was high as a kite on Class-As. "You're *good* at that."

"I…what? S-sorry," Cass said, rolling off of her. Now, the cold waterfall of adrenaline chasing away arousal, she realized what she'd been doing. *Fuck. Shit. I fucked up*.

"For what? I *definitely* wanna do that again," Leah said, biting her lip. "Mmm, I think I need to go get some clean panties, though. Be right back~" She rolled over, got to her feet, and took a few shaky steps toward her bedroom. Cass watched her go, wrestling with her own guilt and confusion.

I fucked up. I fucked up. I fucked up. She'd opened a door that she probably couldn't shut without making an even bigger problem for herself — a problem named Polyphylla, who was currently watching her from the far side of the common room clearing. "…of course you were watching," she grumbled.

"Only at the very end, when the hab spoke up," Polyphylla said, smiling. At least she wasn't upset that Cass had *done* it — that was a risk she hadn't even thought about before diving headlong into frantic lovemaking. "Though I could certainly hear you in my office. Leah sounded like she was having fun." She crossed to Cass in a few long strides, her vines

swishing around her like a floral wake. She leaned down and offered a hand. “Thank you for that. It was very reassuring.”

Cass stared up at the hand for a long second before reaching up to take it. “So you’re *not* mad?” she asked as Polyphylla pulled her to her feet.

“Why should I be mad?” she said, not letting go of Cass’s hand. “Leah hasn’t been able to stop talking about you since you two met — that’s usually how I know she’s found a *very* special friend. Of course, when I found out just *how* feral you are, I was a bit worried, especially about the two of you sharing a hab…but I’m much more at ease about it now,” she added, giving Cass’s hand a little squeeze before letting go. “You know how to treat her. Now, shall we greet our guests?”

Chapter End Notes

I feel like this chapter took me ages to write, but then I went back and checked and, uh, I uploaded the last chapter 3 days ago. What the heck, brain?

Anyway, hopefully this makes Polyphylla come off less like an irredeemable villain and more like, y'know, an alien who doesn't get humans as well as she thinks she does. I wish I'd been able to structure these scenes in a way that made that thread flow better without completely wrecking the flow of everything else. Maybe if I get around to doing a revised epub version when I'm finished...

Anyway, hope you're all having a great day, and thanks for reading!

Chapter 19: Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

In which several arguments take place.
Content Warnings: Rapid-onset amnesia, an anxiety attack, and a sad floret (don't worry her owner is nearby!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I don’t know,” Tsuga muttered as she and Pisca waited outside Polyphylla’s hab. “Maybe she’s getting along fine without me. She’s a tough little terran. Maybe my showing up would just make things uncomfortable for her. I should go.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Pisca said, cradling Aletheia in her arms and idly stroking her with a vine. “Of course she wants to see you! And don’t you want to see her?”

“Of course I do,” Tsuga replied, “but what if that’s the wrong thing for her? What if–“

“Are you *always* like this when a xeno has you this wound up?” Pisca gently draped a vine around Tsuga. “Because it’s really interfering with my image of you as the Cool, Collected Mentor. I might have to submit paperwork to suspend your membership in the Cool, Collected Mentor Committee.”

Tsuga riffled her needles in amusement. “Thank you,” she said softly. Pisca, and even little Aletheia before she’d fallen asleep, had been doing this for her all yesterday and through the night. Every time she started to worry, one or the other would distract her and disrupt the inevitable spiral. “I really do appreciate it.”

“Always,” Pisca said, giving Tsuga a gentle squeeze with her vine.

The door before them slid open, revealing Polyphylla and Cass. “Tsuga! Pisca! And even little Aletheia,” she said, reaching in with a vine to steal a deft stroke or two of Aletheia’s hair, setting her squirming and giggling. “What a lovely surprise!” It was not a surprise, of course — they had checked in with Polyphylla before even setting out — but Tsuga wasn’t concerned with that right now, for she had eyes only for Cass.

And Cass did *not* look well. Not unhealthy, not uninjured, but *shaken*, in a way that Tsuga had so rarely seen her. She seemed present, at least, not retreating into a dissociative state like she had at the meeting the day before, but not much more than that. She knelt down, leaning forward. “Cass, how are you holding up?”

Nothing could have prepared her for what came next. Cass took a step forward, reached out, and hugged Tsuga’s leg, leaning into it and taking a deep breath. Tsuga’s core practically began to vibrate, and her needles all stood on end. She gently placed a hand over Cass, exerting a gentle pressure on her — she could feel the little terran’s muscles relax ever so slightly.

She wants you to take her. Do it now, before it’s too late.

“Mistress, can I–” But Pisca was already setting Aletheia down, and giving her a gentle push towards the two of them. “Cass…are you okay?” She tentatively reached in to touch Cass’s shoulder. Tsuga felt her muscles tighten back up for a moment as she made contact, but she relaxed again afterwards.

“I’m fine,” Cass mumbled. “Just…been a rough couple of days.” She turned her head. “You look… really good.”

“Yeah?” Aletheia’s cheeks warmed to match her hair, and she turned a quirk circle, setting her aquamarine companion dress whirling. “You think so?” Cass nodded but said nothing. Aletheia worried a little hole in the walkway twisting the toes of one foot back and forth, and bit her lip as she glanced away. It was a *very* precious display of just how adorable a terran could be. *Pisca really is lucky,* Tsuga thought.

The cuteness was interrupted by yet more cuteness as Leah appeared behind Polyphylla. “Miss Tsuga! Miss Pisca! Hiii!” Then, as her eyes fixed on Aletheia, she let out a loud, excited gasp. “Oh. My. *Stars*. Your hair is *so red!*” Before Aletheia could say or do anything, Leah was upon her, wrapping her up in a vigorous hug. “Did your Mistress do that for you or is your hair just *like* that? And you smell *so good!*”

“Uh, hi,” Aletheia said, laughing and hugging Leah back.

Polyphylla let out a soft, musical laugh. “Aletheia, meet Leah. I’m sure the two of you will get along very well.” She draped a vine across the both of them and gently guided them towards the door. “Why don’t you all come in and get comfortable, hmm?”

“Polyphylla, might I have a moment with Cass?” Tsuga said.

“Hmm?” Their gazes met, and for a moment Tsuga all but read the response in her demeanor: Polyphylla didn’t want to let Cass out of her sight. She felt herself loosen, a slackening of her usually tight control over her biorhythms, and quite unbidden — but it seemed to have a desirable effect. “…yes, of course,” Polyphylla said after a moment. “Come right on in when you’re done, alright?” She and Pisca followed the two little terrans into her hab, and the door slid shut behind them.

For a long moment Tsuga simply held Cass close, shifting her mass into a sitting position. "I'm here," she said gently. Cass nodded but said nothing. Was she having difficulty speaking again, like Polyphylla had mentioned? "We can take as long as we need to."

"I don't want to go back in," Cass said quietly, burying her face into Tsuga's leg.

"What happened?" Something was obviously wrong with Cass. She had never once behaved like this. There had been meltdowns and arguments and dissociative episodes, but never this kind of *fragility*. Deep inside Tsuga there was a hot ember glowing and threatening to catch, to transform into a conflagration that would consume her from the inside out. *If Polyphylla has done something to her without asking me–*

Cass shook her head. "I just… I think I fucked up and I think I'm fucked and I don't think there's a way out of this," she said, her voice catching. "I slept with Leah. I mean… I *slept* with her, overnight, but then, just now, she– and then I just–"

"… you mean you had sex?" Cass nodded, and Tsuga relaxed fractionally. "Well, I can't imagine she's upset that you and Leah engaged in a little sexual play. Leah does that sort of thing all the time. Maybe she's worried because you're feral, but even then, I should think she'd be happy you're settling in and feeling comfortable enough to do that sort of thing."

She shook her head. "No, it's just– Tsuga, she's not *herself*, she's whatever Polyphylla *made* her, and I wasn't thinking straight, and I–" She choked, shaking her head again and rubbing at her eyes with her arm. "And that's what she wants to do to *me*. She's going to do to me what she did to Leah, I know she is."

"…what she did to Leah? Cass, you don't need that kind of deep reconstructive work," Tsuga said gently. "Listen to me: you haven't done anything wrong, I promise. Honestly, I think this wardship is entirely pointless. You may not be accustomed to the Compact, but you'll adapt naturally over time. This ship's culture is just very…"

"Domesticate first and ask questions later?" Cass supplied. She still seemed on the verge of tears.

"That is a *very* good turn of phrase," Tsuga said, nodding, "and an apt description. The *Tillandsia* has spent much of the last three years domesticating your Cosmic Navy, often taking excess capacity from smaller ships. They've become accustomed to that way of doing things because it's efficient and leads to good ends, and it's been a system that's worked well for them in that context. I'm hoping that we can use this wardship to shift that just a bit, because it certainly doesn't seem suited to *your* case, and the sooner the locals learn that terrans can differ to such an extent, the better."

"Yeah, well…I don't think Polyphylla's interested in *that*," Cass said. "She as good as said she wants to scramble my brain. She was talking about psyche maps and memory landmarks and…." Cass's voice caught again.

"Yes, well, that's her speciality. She's probably the best mnemonic engineer on the ship, at least as far as terrans are concerned. I'm not surprised she's using that skillset to evaluate you."

“She doesn’t want to *evaluate* me,” Cass growled, her anger breaking through her creaking voice. “She tried to wipe my fucking memory this morning!”

“…I’m sorry, *what?*” Tsuga said, bristling as she picked Cass up and hugged her close. Cass didn’t resist or complain, but simply leaned into Tsuga, her head resting on Tsuga’s shoulder. “Please explain. Start from the beginning, and tell me everything.”

And, tears barely held back, Cass did. Tsuga listened patiently, maintaining a gentle pressure and letting her biorhythms soothe the little terran. It seemed to help — as she told the story, her breaths became less sharp, less erratic, and her voice stopped catching every few words. *Don’t let her go. She doesn’t need this wardship. She needs you.*

“I see,” she said quietly when Cass finally finished. “Do you feel a little better having told me about this?” Cass nodded, but said nothing. “Would you like to rest here a while longer?” Again, a nod. “Alright,” Tsuga said. “Don’t fall asleep, okay? And when you’re ready, we can go back in together.” She held Cass for a long while, rocking gently back and forth in a slow rhythm. *Poor little creature*, Tsuga thought. *I wish I could spare you all of this*. She knew she could. But she also knew Cass would never agree to it, and furthermore, that she was probably the worst choice for the job, no matter how much she wanted it.

When Cass finally agreed to go back in, Tsuga set her down gently on the ground, forcing herself not to give Cass the gentle stroking she so deserved and that Tsuga so wanted to give. *Don’t let her go*! “Shall I go first?”

“No, I’ll be alright,” Cass said, taking a deep breath and slowly letting it out. She still looked shaken to Tsuga’s eyes, and every one of Tsuga’s vines wanted to leap out and bundle up the little terran, to hold her and keep her safe. Instead, she stilled them, and let her walk ahead, through the door and into Polyphylla’s sunlit common room. Tsuga had been impressed with Polyphylla’s sense of style and aesthetic when they’d first met, and the way she kept her hab was no small part of it. Her own style had rather ossified over several blooms of obsessing over her work, and a part of her had wanted a little bit of good-natured competition with Polyphylla — but that was all in the wind now.

“Polyphylla, might I borrow you for a moment?” she said, keeping her voice and her biorhythms as even as she could for the sake of the two florets in the room.

“Hm?” Polyphylla looked up from watching Leah introduce Aletheia to one of her many stuffed animals, this one some kind of terran creature Tsuga vaguely recalled as a ‘trinocerous,’ or something like that. (Everbloom, even when Tsuga was this upset, it was hard to stay that way in the light of seeing the terran pack-bonding instinct on full display.) “Of course,” she said. “I don’t think Pisca will mind watching three cuties for a little while?”

“Absolutely not!” Pisca said. She was sitting on the flowery floor, hovering over Leah and Aletheia, her vines occasionally reaching in to stroke one or the other. “Come sit with us!” Tsuga watched Cass warily join the others as Polyphylla crossed to join her.

<Let’s talk in your office,> Tsuga said in Affini, one vine gesturing to the appropriate door.

<Tsuga, is something wrong?> Polyphylla asked, leading the way into the room — like the rest of the hab, it was laden with flowers, cut in half with a small stream that cascaded down a small waterfall laid into one wall. Unlike much of the rest of the hab, however, here there were concessions to utility, like the broad desk, the data terminal, and the massive screens showing a host of information. One prominently displayed a half-sketched-out psyche map, probably Cass's.

<She told me about the dress,> Tsuga said bluntly, tapping the wall to order the door shut.

<I imagine she did>, Polyphylla replied. <And I'll be the first to admit that it was a well-intended mistake. I thought she could do with a little boundary-pushing, but I didn't realize it would provoke such a dysphoric reaction in her until after she had it on, and which point… well, what's the saying?> She switched to Standard English. "The cat's out of the barn, I think?"

<She also told me what you said this morning when she confronted you about it,> Tsuga went on. <About how you said you were going to erase her memory of the event.>

<I *offered* to, and she became very irate.>

<Did you *offer*, or did you simply say you were going do it? What were the words?>

"Tsuga, my Standard English is better than yours," she said, raising one floral eyebrow to emphasize her relative experience where terrans were concerned.

<But not better than Cass's, and in any case I'm not talking about *grammar*,> Tsuga grumbled. She felt her body's shape slip, her vines surging in animate frustration and anger. <I know what your specialty is, but I cannot believe you're considering mnemonic reconstruction on m- on this terran on the *second day* of a wardship!> She had only just stopped herself from saying 'my floret,' and the disjunction in the chorus of her sentence was obvious.

<It's– it's not *reconstruction!*> Polyphylla protested. <It's a simple hypnotic shunt to remove an unpleasant, potentially traumatic memory that might interfere with the evaluation. I acknowledge,> she added, <that the offer did *not* serve its purpose and indeed probably made the situation between us much worse, but I didn't expect such a visceral reaction to either the dress or the offer to remove it from her memory! I've been updating my preliminary psyche map all morning–>

It took all of Tsuga's self-control, wrapping vines around others and squeezing down on her core, not to practically detonate on the spot. <Have you noticed *nothing* about her? Have you not noticed how she loves to recall quotations, if nothing else? She values her memory more than anything else, and you just casually mention going in and tinkering with it?! No wonder she's upset! You may as well have held one of their awful little firearms to her head, as far as she's concerned!>

<I– that's not– I am a *professional*, Tsuga! Of course I'm aware of that!> Polyphylla said, standing her ground and elevating herself, if not to Tsuga's height (oh *no*, had she *fully*

uncompressed herself out of sheer rage?), at least a little higher. <Now will you *please* calm yourself? You're– you're very intimidating when you get like this!>

Tsuga shivered angrily and tried to force herself down into a relatively personable shape, once more forcefully reminded that no matter how competent and in-control Polyphylla seemed, she was only a quarter of Tsuga's own age. <I apologize. But this is important.> *This doesn't need to be such an argument. She just needs to know what* not *to do to Cass*, she told herself.

<I'm well aware I've made a few missteps to begin with, but that's not uncommon when dealing with a new patient — though, in her case, it *would* be for her own good. Solving the problem *now* will make her happier, and if she didn't balk at a *very* minor memory procedure she wouldn't even remember the discomfort! She's in my care and she was *not happy*. What was I supposed to do, leave her to suffer?>

<You are supposed to *listen*, find out what she needs, and give it to her!>

<And I am trying to do that — but I also have to evaluate her ability to adapt to life in the Compact as an independent sophont,> Polyphylla said. <She has a *very* feral persona and I need to find a way to make her relax her grip on it and simply *be herself*, and carrying around all this misery is not going to help that.>

<You talk as if you've already made your decision,> Tsuga spat, only just keeping herself in check.

<Tsuga, she's openly committed to a feralist ideology. I think there *is* a slim possibility for her remaining independent, which I know she wants, and which, based on what I've observed, she could probably manage — but I also have to consider the safety of the community, which a feral persona like this is totally incompatible with!>

<She's not *dangerous*,> Tsuga retorted. <She's said many times, and truthfully in my opinion, that she considers violence to be a useless tool against us.>

<Probably the smartest thing she's ever said,> Polyphylla mused. <And that's not an insult, she *is* quite clever, that's obvious.> She let out a very terran sigh, her vines slackening just a little. <Look, at the very least, I *need* a full psyche map to make a proper evaluation as to whether she honestly means that, and if she's not going to be cooperative, I'm going to have to recommend her for domestication by default.>

<So observe her,> Tsuga said, relaxing just a little. *Have I gotten through to her?* <Let her be, interfere as little as you can, and *observe*.>

Polyphylla shook her head. <I need more information than that, she's too guarded. Not just because of my mistakes, either — that's another problematic part of her feral persona. Ideally, I'd do a mnemonic regression and feel out her core landmarks, but I think she'd react very poorly to that suggestion. I *could* erase her memory of it, but she's too clever, I'm sure she'd figure it out somehow. The really clever ones are *always* the most problematic when it comes to mnemonic engineering.>

Tsuga ruminated on the problem as she finished putting herself back together, and Polyphylla let her have the time. She was right in that a mnemonic regression would let her put together a very thorough inventory of Cass's basic personality and how any of her personas interacted with it, and that would be a strong piece of evidence in favor of letting her remain independent. *Or it'd sign her domestication paperwork for her*, she thought, but Cass was a good girl — she wouldn't do anything that'd threaten the community. If anything, what she was doing was because she feared for *her* community. They just needed to figure out how to bridge the gap between one community and the other in her mind.

<Would you consent to my assistance?> Tsuga finally said. <If I'm present, and I assure Cass that I would prevent you from making any alterations to her memory while she's under…. she *might* agree to it. On the other vine, it might seriously damage her trust in me, but it's worth a try. Don't bring it up today, though, she needs time to recover.> *I need to make some kind of gesture here,* she thought. *Something that says 'reconciliation.'* She extended a vine and entangled it with one of Polyphylla's. <I know you're just trying to help. Cass is just a very complicated little creature.>

<That she is,> Polyphylla agreed. <I don't know how familiar you are with terran psyche maps, but you can see it all right there.> She gestured with a vine at one of the screens. <I've only skimmed the surface, but I've already found trauma layered on trauma. Everbloom only knows what most of them *are*, but their presence is obvious to see. That's why I wanted to resolve the dysphoria. That, at least, is a relatively easy knot to untangle, and it would probably help with the other issues. It's honestly a wonder she's holding herself together at all.>

<I understand,> Tsuga said. <But that's just my point: please keep in mind how fragile xenos are. Especially *this* xeno, no matter how tough she seems.> She shivered, and squeezed down on Polyphylla's vine just a little. *Don't think about the past right now*. *Cass needs you in the present*. <One more thing, though.>

<Yes?>

<She doesn't understand what you've done for Leah. You need to explain. It may help, it may not. But you need to tell her.>

"You said we could talk about it later," Aletheia said, the barest hint of a pout on her face, "and we haven't talked about it at *all*, and now we're about to leave."

"It's not something to have out in front of others," Cass replied, skin on the back of her neck tingling in the way that told her she'd spent far too much time socializing. She and Aletheia had spent most of the day being dragged excitedly around by Leah as she showed them every part of the hab, her favorite games, demanded several mandatory snuggle sessions, and so on. Meanwhile, the three Affini had largely talked amongst themselves, leaving Cass with the sense that she'd been sat at the kid's table by mistake. Tsuga, at least, tried to rope her in every time Leah's meanderings brought them back to the side of her Mistress, and if nothing else Cass had managed to avoid any more uncomfortable encounters with Pisca. Tsuga had clearly let Polyphylla have it in private judging by the change in her behavior afterwards,

even if the hab's soundproofing kept her from hearing any of it. She'd been much less patronizing and hovered over Cass *far* less than she had been before.

"I'm not afraid of people knowing that I l–"

"*No*," Cass said, holding up her hand. "You don't know me well enough to say that word." Seeing the hurt expression on Aletheia's face, she lowered her hand and added, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like– look, I just don't want you to dig an emotional hole for yourself that you can't climb out of before we figure this out, okay? I'm still not comfortable with this. You're half my age, and you're my subordinate on top of it, it's unethical!"

"I'm not your subordinate," Aletheia said, furrowing her eyebrows. "Not anymore. Not since…" She glanced back at the common room, where Pisca was saying her goodbyes to Polyphylla and Leah — Tsuga had left a short while before, and Cass had spent a long time in a very tight hug with her. "I belong to Mistress now, okay?" she finally said. "And I'm not afraid to say that either!"

Cass looked at her for a long second. *Something* has *changed in her*, she thought. *A month ago, this conversation would have had her sobbing. Scratch that, she'd never have the courage to even have it*. Maybe it was something Pisca had done to her, like Polyphylla had remade Leah, but if so it was a far subtler change. More likely, Cass thought, it was simply her becoming more *herself* after so long trying to be someone else and failing — that was an experience she knew all too well, and despite everything it warmed her heart a little to see Aletheia getting to finally experience it. "Okay," she said quietly. "But you *were* my subordinate. You get why that's a problem for me, right?"

"Cass, you're not going to hurt me or take advantage of me," Aletheia said. "That's just not who you are. And even if you *did*, well… Mistress would fix it," she said, biting her lip and casting another glance back to the common room.

Cass's gut clenched. *It* is *who I am*, she thought, a bitter, sour taste rising in her mouth. "We'll talk about it, okay?"

"Alright," Aletheia said. "Over chat? Leah said you two talked a bunch over it. What's your username?"

"Propaganda of the deed. All one word."

Aletheia rolled her eyes and giggled. "Stars, of *course* it is. It was either that or, I don't know, Kropotkin's Revenge or something."

Cass couldn't help but smile a little. "And you?"

Aletheia blushed and muttered, "Pinecone. I-it's, uhm, she calls me that, sometimes. Her little pinecone." She squirmed happily and made a delighted little noise. "I know it's not for you, but… she really does make me *so happy*. Happier than I've ever been."

"I can tell," Cass said softly. *I'm sorry I couldn't give you what you needed before they did*, she thought. *Maybe then, you wouldn't feel like you have to do this*. "Go on, I bet she's

waiting."

"Okay. Talk to you on the net," she said. She lingered for a moment, and Cass worried that she might try to sneak another kiss, but instead she turned and went right to Pisca's side, the same way Leah always did, like a dog heeling for its master.

Cass shivered and tried not to think about it, quietly ducking into Leah's bedroom and sitting down on a particularly soft bed of flowers that Leah had pointed out to her and Aletheia earlier. She hugged her knees and sucked in a deep breath, holding it for five long seconds before letting it whistle out. The only sound was the mirrorfall and the distant cries of fake birds– "Hab, can you quiet the birds, please?"

"Absolutely!" The birdsong disappeared, the mirrorfall grew quiet, and even the sounds of conversation in the common room grew hushed. It was like a weight vanishing from Cass's shoulders — a little solitude went a long way. Bulwark had been hard on her nerves, but at least she'd had the frigid outdoors and the remoteness of a commanding officer to retreat into; here, she didn't have that, didn't have *any* way to build a context for herself. She had to constantly feel out safe places to step, safe words to use, safe things to *think*, especially when Polyphylla was in the room. She wasn't telepathic, Cass was pretty sure about that, but she *was* inhumanly perceptive, and Cass didn't know how much she might be giving away to an alien shrub that had bulls-eyed her dysphoric longing based on fucking *microexpressions*.

Time slipped away from Cass as she sat there. Her thoughts still spun, but gradually she was able to guide them into a meditative slowness. It felt like it had been ages since she could find this kind of silence, but it had only been a scant couple of days since she'd been staying with Tsuga — and that was a thought that made her heart ache. *Do I miss her? I suppose one misses a friend.* She began to worry over whether her farewell to Tsuga had been too brusque, but they understood one another well enough, Cass thought, for Tsuga to know she was simply worn out. Didn't they? *If she's a friend. Who knows what she thinks.*

Something landed next to Cass with a thump, startling her even as it burrowed into her. Leah's scent was the first thing Cass noticed that told her what had just happened — Leah was glomming onto her and squeezing for her life. "H-hey," she said, her voice catching just a little. "What's up?" She said nothing, but merely shook her head and held on tighter. "…are you okay? Where's Polyphylla?"

"Mistress is making dinner," she said quietly. "Are you mad at me?"

"What? No," Cass said. "Why would I be mad about you?"

She sniffled. "You were out there and then you were gone. And then Allie and Miss Pisca left and Mistress went to cook dinner and… and I felt *wrong.*" She let out another sad little sniffle. "I'm sad. Hug me."

"Okay," Cass said, putting an arm around Leah. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you feel like I was avoiding you. I just needed a little quiet time to– Leah, what's wrong?" she asked as the girl let out another chain of whimpers, barely holding onto her composure. *I didn't think she knew* how *to be sad,* Cass thought.

“I don’t know,” she whimpered. “Everything was okay and now everything’s *not* okay and I’m sad and I don’t know *why* and it *hurts* and I want it to *stop*.”

“Maybe we should go get Polyphylla,” Cass said. *Something’s wrong. Something’s really wrong*.

“Are you mad at me?” she whispered.

“No,” Cass said. *Did she tune out again?* “I said no. Why would I be mad–”

“I don’t know!” She burst into tears and sobbed into Cass’s shoulder. “I don’t know! Why am I in here? Where’s Mistress?”

“You said she’s making dinner,” Cass said, trying to get Leah to her feet, but she clung too fiercely to Cass for her to detach her. “Leah, come on, let’s go find her.”

“It’s… it’s dinnertime? Is Allie staying?” She sniffed, coughing out another sob. “Why am I crying? Why do I hurt? Cassie, what’s wrong, what did I do? I did something wrong, didn’t I? Are you mad at me?!” Her eyes went wide as she stared up at Cass. “Please don’t leave, please don’t leave, I don’t want to be alone!” With sudden, jolting force that left Cass’s arms aching, Leah was torn out of her grasp and into the air — Polyphylla was in the room as suddenly as a bolt of lightning, cuddling and squeezing the weeping terran in her arms as she knelt down on the floor.

“Shhh, shhh, I’m here, petal, I’m here,” she whispered, stroking Leah’s hair and brushing away her tears. “My darling Leah, I’m so sorry! Eyes on me, little one, eyes on me!” Her vines forced Leah’s head to face her, and as Cass watched Polyphylla’s shape seemed to loosen slightly, the glow of her eyes brightening and capturing Leah’s gaze. “You are safe, and you are loved,” Polyphylla said, her voice thrumming with uncanny harmonies — it reminded Cass vividly, uncomfortably, of what the Captain had done to Nell. She plugged her ears, but the sound of Polyphylla’s voice seemed to penetrate her entire body. “You will always be safe, and you will always be loved. I will never, ever abandon you. Now, it’s naptime, little one.” A vine tipped with a brilliant violet flower drifted up and pressed itself to Leah’s face. “Deep breaths, now. Deep breaths. No bad dreams, just nice comfy quiet sleep.” She went limp in just a few heartbeats, and Polyphylla seemed to collapse in on herself, her legs dissociating into a tangled nest of vines.

“What…the *fuck?!*” Cass said, getting to her feet and rubbing her shoulder. It had taken the brunt of the jolt, and would probably ache for a while, but it seemed more or less intact. Her heart was pounding in her chest, matching the thrumming she still felt resonating in the room.

“I’m sorry for hurting you,” Polyphylla said, not looking away from Leah. “I had to get to her as quickly as I could, before the mnemonic recursion got worse.” She made a dissonant, frustrated noise, and a few of her vines reached out towards Cass. “Here, let me make sure you’re alright.”

“I’m *fine*,” Cass said, batting a vine away. “What the *fuck* was that?”

“I was going to explain things after dinner,” she said, shaking her head. “You won’t think me incompetent if I simply compile it for you, will you? I’m probably going to be doing maintenance on Leah all night.”

“Polyphylla,” Cass said, as calmly as she could make herself. She took a deep breath, and enunciated each word as emphatically as she could. “What. The. *Fuck!*”

“I set up a posthypnotic mechanism in Leah’s mind,” she said, gently stroking Leah’s hair and tucking it behind her ears. “It integrates with her haustoric implant and serves as a watchdog of sorts. You saw it in the bath, earlier, when she lost her train of thought after asking about your scar. That’s… oh, no, no, no, this is the wrong way to explain it, the wrong place to start, and the wrong time to do it.”

“Wait, those blackouts are *intentional?*” Cass said, staring. “All the times it happened I thought that was some kind of glitch because of the drugs she’s on or because you fucked with her mind too much!”

“No, no,” Polyphylla said. “It’s to– she has a great deal of trauma that I have buried as deeply as I can, but every new experience has the potential to find its way down to– *down* isn’t the right word, I’m talking about specific neurons–“ She made a frustrated noise. “This language is so *limited*. How to simplify… it’s to keep her from dredging up her trauma by selectively editing her memory in real-time. Think of it like… like a circuitbreaker, yes? A little bit of memory gets wiped to prevent a larger problem from arising.” She paused. “You said ‘all the times.’ How many times have you seen her do that since you met her?”

“I…I don’t know,” Cass said. “Five or six, maybe more?” She was too busy trying to fully internalize what she was being told to sift through her memories for details. *A fucking psychic circuitbreaker?!*

“Five or six?! Ugh!” She squeezed Leah close. “No wonder she’s going into recursion if her eqilibrium is that unstable! Oh, my poor little petal. It’s been so long since the last time this happened, I thought we were finally past it. I thought I’d finally gotten her to a point where I could just relax and let her be happy and find her own way! That’s why I’ve been training her to be more independent, to go out on her own. Oh flower, I’m so, so sorry, this is all my fault! I should have kept you closer…”

“You’re saying *I* did this?” Cass said, a chill running up her spine and crouching, claws out, at the back of her neck. “Just being around me breaks her brain?”

“It’s not being around you specifically,” Polyphylla said. “Well, maybe just a little, but only because you probably remind her of who she used to be. Please don’t take this as an insult, but you’re pretty clearly someone who is familiar with violence. She used to be as well.”

“The real Leah, you mean?”

“There is no *real* Leah, Cass, any more than there’s a fake Leah,” Polyphylla said, either too tired or too focused on the floret in her vines to sound exasperated. “There’s just *Leah*. My Leah. My poor, sweet Leah.” She nuzzled into the girl’s slack, sleeping face.

“But you made her this way,” Cass insisted. “You… you built up this *version* of her–“

“I only cut away the scar tissue of her life in the Accord so she could finally bloom as she was meant to,” Polyphylla said, and for a moment there was an edge of bitterness in her voice, but she mastered it and pushed it away. “Cass, I promise you that I will explain everything, but I’m sure you can understand that right now, I am in no state for it. Leah needs me. I’m going to take her to my office and begin bringing her back up, slowly and carefully dosed on xenodrugs to keep her stable and in a trance state. I’ll need quiet for the diagnostics I’ll run after that, and any work I do to shore up her mnemonic equilibrium. I know we’ve had difficulties, but can you please cooperate with me that far at least, for Leah’s sake?”

Cass nodded. She didn’t even have to think about it. The sound of Leah sobbing and crying out in confusion and despair was etched into Cass’s heart. That *was* one thing she could agree with Polyphylla about — she didn’t ever want to hear that sound again. “I just… one thing, first?” she said as Polyphylla rose to her feet. “Why? Why did you do this to her?”

“Why do you think?” Polyphylla said, looking down and meeting her with red-and-violet-flecked eyes. “She asked me to.”

Chapter End Notes

It only took me 100,000 words to get to the point where I actually explain what the hell Leah's deal is.

Chapter 20: Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

> For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

> In which I finally explain Leah's Deal. Mind the content warning here, folks, it's a rough one.
> Content Warning: Leah's Backstory (discussion of abandonment, abuse, conscription, self-hatred, suicidal ideation and attempted suicide, and memory alteration). Also, bondage/vineplay, totally unrelated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Night came and went. Cass laid on the pillowy, floral sofa in Polyphylla's common room, not wanting to go back into Leah's room, not after what had just happened there. Dinner, a compiled turkey sandwich, sat like a brick in her stomach as she stared up at the phantom moonlight and failed to sleep for hours. Her mind reeled with questions that she had no answers for. '*She asked me to' — what the fuck does that even mean?* From her office, Polyphylla's voice, too distant to make out meaningful words, could occasionally be heard. Eventually, Cass drifted off out of sheer fatigue, and dreamed of the hot press of bodies in a souk in Zerqamîsh, voices that reminded her of the accent her mother never quite managed to shake when she spoke Farsi, the accent she'd half-handed down to her daughter in a few phonemes and phrases.

She woke to early-morning light streaming into the common room in thick columns, and the uneasy ache of having slept in an odd place and in an odd position. She stretched out her stiffness — her shoulder still hurt a bit — and sat up. She could hear Polyphylla from the other room. She'd said she'd be working all night, but Cass hadn't really believed it. Then again, she wasn't entirely sure Affini *needed* to sleep. She climbed down from the sofa, used the bathroom, splashed water from a basin fed by a tiny waterfall on her face, and got a hot steaming mug of tea out of the compiler. Then, as unobtrusively as she could, she took a seat at the entrance to Polyphylla's office, staring in.

Polyphylla stood in front of her desk, where Leah lay prostrate on some kind of thick, cushy blanket. Her eyes were open, but she seemed miles away. Every screen was lit up, and Polyphylla was tapping away at a terminal. "Recite," she said. "Series sixteen. Begin."

“A painting of eleven cookies,” Leah said. Her voice was distant, dreamy, unconcerned. Better than when Cass had last heard it, but still strange and a little off-putting. “A big, blue anchor. A spectrum jelly birthday party. An elevator full of cakes…”

“How many cakes?”

“…fifteen cakes. A rhinoceros dancing on a transit platform. The Big Ring at night. A chocolate bar with caramel and sea salt. A fish…a fish….”

“Skip.” Polyphylla marked several notes in her tablet.

“Four blue birds flying in a circle. A piano with 85 keys.” She continued to recite for several minutes, without further interruption. Polyphylla seemed to relax when she reached the end.

“Good girl, Leah,” she said, her voice thrumming as she held the violet flower against Leah’s face . “Now, it’s time for you to rest. Let those pretty eyes slip shut, and take a deep breath, and let it out slowly.” Cass watched Leah’s chest rise and fall, the breaths slowing as she drifted off. Polyphylla gently lifted her off the desk, cradling her in her arms, and turned to face Cass. “Thank you for not interrupting,” she said. “I’m done for now. How is your shoulder feeling?”

“It’s fine. Is she going to be okay?” Cass asked, her voice still froggy from hours of disuse. She coughed to clear her throat and took a sip of tea. “What *was* all that?”

“Through hypnosis, I committed a series of images to Leah’s long-term memory,” Polyphylla said. She crossed the office, passing by Cass. “Each is associated with a particular mnemonic landmark, or more specifically, with the reinforcements *around* those landmarks. This is all *very* non-technical language, you understand?”

“Right,” Cass said, getting to her feet and following. “But what do they *mean*?”

“The images themselves are meaningless. Its just a way for me to test her mnemonic equilibrium. If she has difficulty recalling an image, it implies dysfunction in the reinforcements around a particular landmark, so I know where the issue is and can direct my efforts appropriately.” She took a seat on the sofa, laying Leah down on her lap and stroking her hair. “Poor petal…”

“But she’s going to be okay, right?” Cass started trying to climb up one-handed, but Polyphylla offered a few vines, and after a moment of hesitation Cass accepted the help.

“She’ll be fine. She’s doing much better now than she was last night, that’s for certain. The fish is always a sticking point, and I’m still not entirely sure why. I put her back under to give her mind a chance to integrate the last of the patches I applied, but she needs to eat. In a little while, she should be well enough to be awake long enough for that. But that depends in part on you,” she added, giving Cass a hard look. “No talk of violence, of abandonment, of being lost, or of being upset with her for *any* reason. Am I understood?” Cass nodded — Polyphylla’s tone brooked no disagreement, and in any case she didn’t *want* to cause Leah any harm. “Good. Have you eaten?”

Cass shook her head. “Just the tea.”

“Alright, I’ll make breakfast for you both in a little while. How do you feel about waffles? They’re Leah’s favorite.” She softened, smiling down at the girl in her lap. “She thinks they’re funny, and she likes all the little holes to put things in. I think she’d very much like to wake up to waffles.”

“Waffles are fine,” Cass said. She couldn’t help but smile a little herself — that sounded *very* Leah. “Now, are you going to explain her to me, or not?”

A ripple seemed to run through Polyphylla as her vines flexed and shifted. “I’m still not entirely sure where to start.”

“Try the beginning?” Cass suggested.

“Her beginning, or the beginning of our time together? Well, I suppose the second one is probably a better introduction to her particular difficulties,” she said. “I met Leah a little over three years ago now, very early on during the Terran Pacification Program, when we captured her ship, the *Tranquility*. They were still trying things like invading *our* ships when we caught them,” she said, chuckling a little. “They hadn’t quite realized how futile their fighting was. Then again, some of them still haven’t.

“Leah was, at first, just one of many patients, a little more problematic than the others but very much the type: angry, violent, boorish, and *highly* xenophobic. Certainly a candidate for domestication even if she *hadn’t* been actively trying to cause harm, but the sheer number of terrans we took when we captured *Tranquility* and her sister ships, which were troop carriers, meant that we were very backed up when it came to haustoric implant surgeries, so we did our best to treat them through other means until we could get them all implanted. I’m very pleased to say we had quite a few successes on that score, but Leah was not one of them. She seemed to actually get angrier the more we tried to help her.” She paused for a moment, idly stroking Leah’s hair, and let out a very human sigh. “I wasn’t the one who prepared her initial psyche map, nor was I the one caring for her at the time. I might have seen the signs.”

Cass waited a moment before prompting her. “What signs?”

“The self-hatred, of course,” Polyphylla said. “All that anger and xenophobia was just externalized self-hatred, and she hated herself more than I think I have *ever* seen a terran hate. All the care and help we offered her just made it worse, because she was absolutely convinced that she didn’t deserve it. Worse, her facade made it difficult to spot the spiraling until it became outright suicidal ideation.”

“…she tried to kill herself?” Cass said, staring, trying to square it in her head. *None of this*, she thought, *sounds anything like what she said about there not being a real Leah underneath it all*. She seemed to be describing Leah’s polar opposite, if anything.

“And very nearly succeeded,” Polyphylla said, quietly, not taking her eyes off Leah. “She managed to convince Alnus, the Affini watching over her, to let her help with the cooking, and so got access to a knife. The minute he looked away–“ She shook her head. “She made a very deep wound, but he got to her quickly and used a vine as a tourniquet. I took over her

care after that. I don't blame Alnus, but he felt horrible about letting it happen, and he couldn't continue with her. She needed specialized care, anyway.

"At the time, we didn't have access to the Accord's records beyond what we were able to pull from a few planets and ships, so the Office of Transitional Neoxenoveterinary Archeobureaucracy didn't have anything on her — I had to work from scratch, putting her in a deep trance and combing through her memories." She finally looked up at Cass. "You are a complicated little terran, Cass, but compared to Leah, I think your problems are very straightforward."

"Skip the editorial commentary, please," Cass said. "I have my problems, and I handle them just fine. I don't need *help* with them." The last thing she needed was this alien poking around inside *her* head.

"Fine," Polyphylla replied. Cass was shocked — she'd expected more of an argument. "There was a lot to sift through, of course. Memories are complex and interconnected, and one can rarely work in a linear fashion." She paused, her form tightening for just a second. "What I am about to tell you, I have placed a Sophont Wellbeing hold on — the information is protected from casual searches, and only I can authorize its release. If you share this information with anyone else, I will be extremely disappointed in you. Under *no circumstances* is Leah to hear *any* of it."

"R-right," Cass said, her breath seizing in her chest for just a moment as she withered under Polyphylla's stare.

Polyphylla took a moment to compose herself, vines stroking Leah's hair all the while. "Leah either got lost or was abandoned by her parents at an early age — even now, with Accord records to sift through, the details aren't quite certain. From there, she went into an extremely neglectful foster home, and eventually spent most of her time living on the streets. She was routinely abused by virtually everyone in her life to one degree or another, and further abused by your economic system and your government. This all taught her, at a very deep and fundamental level, that she was not valued, that she was not loved, and furthermore did not even deserve to be loved at all. I have been trying for three years to negate that impulse, but so far it has always found a way to resurface. It is *very* deeply ingrained."

Cass nodded. It was a sad story, to be sure, even in the loose sketch Polyphylla was offering. She had known families that troubled back in Zerqamîsh, but the ummah, the whole community, had at least tried its best to help them. Zakat *was* one of the Five Pillars, no matter how much the Accord had tried to extirpate any kind of community feeling, especially among religious communities. Without that aid, who knew how bad things could get?

Polyphylla continued: "Eventually, she was convicted of debt-crime, which is a concept I am still aghast at, and forcibly enrolled in a penal battalion of the Stellar Marine Corps — and whatever cruelties your world had seen fit to visit upon her before did nothing to prepare her for what *they* would do to her." She scooped Leah up cuddling her close and squeezing her gently. "My poor petal. *They're* the ones that taught her to hate others as much as she hated herself. They broke her in so many ways, and that was the only thing she could hold onto. They made her do such awful things, and she internalized all of their nonsense for the sake of survival."

Cass swallowed heavily, trying to keep her breathing under control. “What fleet was the *Tranquility* assigned to?” The odds were so long — the Accord was massive, and the likelihood that it had been a part of the fleet that had fired the shot that destroyed Landfall were absurdly remote, but she had to know.

“I don’t remember the specific fleet, but I know it was part of the strike group assigned to what you call the Corvus Sector, if that helps.”

Cass let out a sigh of relief, and felt her eyes’ burning urge to well up in tears. *The far side of the Accord*. Leah had been a Stellar Marine, the boot on the neck of humanity. It hadn’t been by choice, but to hear Polyphylla tell it, she seemed to have embraced the life, for her own sake if nothing else. Class consciousness could be fostered in anyone’s heart — even Nikolai had come a long way from the shitty, violent screw he’d been when he’d been captured — but if Leah had been part of the fleet that made the Pillar of Fire, Cass wasn’t sure she could bring herself to forgive her for it.

“Like I said, she’d internalized their worldview — that’s why it was so hard for her when we captured her. When she acted out, we only showed her love and care in return, and she couldn’t understand it. Eventually, though, she *did* realize that we were acting in earnest, that we meant what we said, and that we genuinely just wanted to help her. Then she began to question her own worldview, her own actions, and rather than blame those who forced them on her, she blamed it on herself, and turned all the hate she’d learned back in on herself again. She essentially suffered a total collapse of her understanding of herself.” She paused, finally seeming to notice Cass’s emotional turmoil. “Are you alright?” Polyphylla asked, reaching out with a single vine but refraining, thankfully, from actually touching Cass with it.

“I’ll be okay,” Cass said, her voice a strained whisper. “It’s just a lot to hear.”

“I know. But the important thing is, she survived it, and she made it here to me, and I dug and I dug and finally, at long last, I found *her* beneath all of that armor she had to put up to protect herself.” She planted a gentle kiss on Leah’s forehead. “This sweet girl, who just wants *love*, and to love others. To laugh, and play, and just to *be*. But she didn’t know how to be that kind of person. No one ever gave her the chance, and she didn’t believe she could ever be that person after what she’d done. But even still, even if she didn’t think she deserved it, she wanted it so, so badly. So I helped her.”

“You wiped her memory,” Cass said, fingers clutching tightly around the rapidly-cooling mug of tea. She understood why someone who was suicidal might ask for something like that — it was the one kind of suicide the Affini seemed to respect.

“Not completely, no,” Polyphylla said. “Something that drastic would be like taking a hammer to a glass sculpture, and anyway it wouldn’t solve the problem. Every time you think something, a given thought, you make a neural connection. The more you think that thing, the stronger that connection becomes, and the less calorically intensive it is to think that thought. The brain, as an evolved organ, always wants to take the path of least resistance, and so is more likely to find its way down that path. That’s how any biological neural network functions. Even if I *were* to wipe Leah’s episodic memory, those paths would still remain. The trauma would still *be* there, and she would still find her way into it, except now it would be wholly without context and even more terrifying. In order to eliminate that, I would have

to completely wipe all of her episodic *and* semantic memory, and a good bit of her procedural memory as well. There'd be nothing left but fragments, some of the trauma would probably still linger, and she would no longer be Leah in any meaningful sense."

"Hammer to a glass sculpture," Cass echoed. "Right. So what *did* you do? Because she sure doesn't act like a fucking jarhead."

"Language!" she hissed, twisting her arms in ways that would have shattered bone to cover Leah's ears as quickly as she could.

"She's unconscious," Cass said, rolling her eyes.

"Nevertheless!" She gently laid Leah down in her lap again, vines fussing over her hair, her dress, her collar. "To answer your question, instead of eliminating those pathways, I isolated them. It required a great deal of extremely intensive mnemonic engineering. Think of it like…like hydroengineering, I suppose. Large dams and aquifers, changing the course of rivers. By constructing channels for her thoughts, and by constructing bypasses on routes representing trauma, her thoughts tend instead to avoid them. This is what I mean when I say 'mnemonic equilibrium.' Unfortunately, overpressure — here representing stress associated with particular memories — can still force the issue. This is why the watchdog subroutine exists, to eliminate that stress before it can trigger that overpressure. This is a very odd metaphor, and I hope you understand what I'm saying."

"I think I get it," Cass said. "So you *didn't* wipe her memories, you just made her not think about them."

"No, the episodic memory I did remove a great deal of," Polyphylla said, looking down and tracing lines on Leah's forehead with a vine as she spoke. "Just not all of it, and not in large swathes when I could avoid it. I tried my very best to keep as many of her memories intact as I could without leaving her anything that might stress her mnemonic equilibrium. Especially the happy memories, which she *does* have. She remembers that she's from Vancouver-Victoria, for example, and she remembers playing in the park in winter when it was cool enough to stay outside for long periods of time. She remembers her first kiss, which was *not* easy to keep considering how that relationship ended, but it was important to her nevertheless. Things like that."

"So how much of her is *her*?"

"I keep telling you," Polyphylla said, affecting a sigh, "*all* of her is her. She remembers her childhood more or less intact, and a bit of her adolescence, and a very little bit of her young adulthood. All gently adjusted, of course, otherwise they might cause dysphoria or confusion. Then, there is a…very large blank, unfortunately, until I started taking care of her. There wasn't much I could salvage from her time in the Stellar Marines. But, I did find a solution to that, which is, every so often, to let her mind fill in those gaps with memories of things we've done together, suitably modified to suit the context." She seemed to slump just a little, her form losing just a touch of definition, her eyes flushing with violet streaks. "It's a little sad, not being able to let the first time we did something together be the first time she's gotten to do something, but it helps stabilize her, and that keeps her happy, and that's all that matters."

“So… she’s *her*,” Cass said, looking down at Leah, her face an innocent mask of sleep as she lay in Polyphylla’s lap. “Or at least…something like herself, anyway.” Her gut clenched in a way that had nothing to do with hunger, and she felt a heat spreading across the back of her head, climbing inch by inch up her scalp.

“She is, to the best of my ability to recreate, who she would be if she’d been allowed to grow into the person she most wanted to be,” Polyphylla said. “She is still a work in progress, even after all this time. But I will never, *ever* stop trying.” She looked up at Cass, met her gaze. “We all want that, Cass, for every xeno — for you to be *you*, the best you, the you that makes you happiest. Everything else is just aesthetics or logistics.” She paused, and smiled. “Or flirting. There’s a lot of that, too.”

The heat wasn’t going away, and her stomach wasn’t settling itself. Cass had the uncomfortable feeling of pressure in her head that came of having to reevaluate things in a hurry, the sensation of the current model of reality not quite meshing with what was going on. *If she* is *herself…but then…even so…* She squeezed her eyes shut and forced a handful of slow, even breaths.

“Are you alright, Cass?” Polyphylla asked. Cass nodded. She *would* be okay. She just needed to process things. New thoughts, new models, the new status quo. “Okay. Would you mind holding Leah? I think she’s had long enough to internalize my mnemonic patches, so I’m going to give her the counteragent.” She felt a soft, sweet-smelling weight deposited gently in her lap, and of her own accord her arms rose to support it. “She should wake up just about when the waffles are ready, and after last night I would very much like her to wake up in the arms of someone she cares for.” Cass heard the soft rasping of leaves on leaves as she rose, and the soft *thumps* of her footsteps. She opened her eyes to find Leah, still asleep but lightly stirring, curling up with her head on Cass’s shoulder. The thin red collar around her neck caught the artificial morning light, and shone beautifully. There was a tightness in Cass’s chest, and her arms squeezed just a little bit tighter.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I haven’t been fair to you.” *Love rests on no foundation*, she recited to herself. *It is an endless ocean, without beginning or end.* “I don’t know what this all means, or what I’m going to do, but I know that much.”

Leah stirred in her arms again, her eyes fluttering open for a brief moment. “Cassie…?” She scarcely had time to focus her eyes before her eyelids drifted back down.

“Hey,” Cass whispered, smiling. “Good morning.”

“Nnnnfsleepy,” she mumbled, burrowing into Cass’s shoulder.

“Rest as long as you need to,” Cass said, stroking Leah’s hair with one hand. “There’s no rush.”

<Pinecone has joined #orientation. Yay!>

<Pickledancer> Allie! Hey!

<Pinecone> Heyyyyy

<EternalWeekend> yesssss now we can finally hear what happened!!!

<Pickledancer> Yeah, spill, what did she say?

<glowpocket> please say allicass real, I need this in my life

<Pinecone> Uuuugh I don't think it went super well?

<Pinecone> We did talk! but she was really stressed out so it probably wasn't a good time

<Pickledancer> :(

<Pinecone> And she's living with the prettiest girl *ever* right now and I feel like I'm *so* out of her league!

<EternalWeekend> liiiies

<@RosaElectrica> I would like to remind you, Allie, that you are in fact terribly cute and extremely in her league.

<Pinecone> Yes, Miss Gallica. But still! She's there all the time and I'm not and I think they already might have something going on and uuuuugh

<glowpocket> okay but did you say the L word

<Pinecone> I tried but she wouldn't let me!

<glowpocket> whaaaaaaaaat

<Pinecone> She said I didn't know her well enough, but I spent three years at Bulwark with her and she basically kept me alive before the revolution and aaaaaaaaa

<Pinecone> I just wanna smooch her ;-;

<glowpocket> boooooo

<Pickledancer> Hey, don't worry, okay? It'll work out

<Pickledancer> You're really cool and you're super cute

<sudont> Wait, you were at Bulwark Pinecone? Do I know you?

<sudont> (This is Forsythe)

<Pinecone> OMS GREG hi!!!!!

<Pinecone> <—— McCracken!!! (she/her pls, I'm going by Aletheia now!)

<sudont> Whoa. Okay! Uhm, congratulations?

<Pinecone> Thaaaanks! When did you get here? I heard everyone was hiding

<sudont> Just a couple days ago. And yeah, we were, but they found us pretty quickly.

<glowpocket> so new he's still got that fresh from the compiler smell

<@RosaElectrica> We were helping him get acclimated to the overnet just a little while ago. I gave him command line access to his hab's systems so he could play around with them and see the file structure.

<sudont> Which I do appreciate. Anything's better than maintaining the same [redacted] radar array for three years running

<sudont> …I thought I disabled that. Is there a server-side censorship daemon?

<@RosaElectica> There is. There are florets in here whose owners don't want them exposed to foul language.

<sudont> Ooof. okay.

<sudont> Pinecone: I just scrolled up and reread all of that. You've talked to Cass? Is she okay? I mean, I know a lot of what Nell said wasn't very accurate, but uh… I still worry, you know?

<Pinecone> It's complicated :<

The hab was so *quiet*. For the first time, that bothered Tsuga. There were none of the little incidental sounds a terran made as they went about their day — no little footsteps, no grunt as they climbed up onto the sofa, no yawns, no softy muttered obscenities when they tripped over their own tiny feet. Pisca and Aletheia had offered to stay again, and Tsuga had been very tempted to take them up on it, but she had instead demurred. *I need to get used to this again*, she'd told herself. *Someday, Cass will either be living on her own, or she'll have an owner, and either way she won't be here*. She had thrown herself into her work and tried very hard not to think about it. There were reports to write about the atmospheric desaturation process, and her expertise in that kind of work was very much applicable.

Which made the blank page in front of her all the more infuriating. She'd been getting more work done when Cass was here, when she was obsessively taking care of her and pretending that she was her floret, than she was now, with no distractions and nothing else to do with her time.

A soft chime broke through the oppressive silence, a signal that someone was at the door of her hab. She rose, pushing away from the desk and the frustratingly empty screen upon it, and made for the entryway — any distraction, at this point, was a welcome one, even the one she got.

"Tsuga," Andoa said, smiling, eir eyes a calm and comforting blue shot through with veins of gold. Tsuga noticed at once that something about eir biorhythms was off, like a waveform

experiencing interference that made it wobble and shake out of shape. “How have you been holding up?”

“Well enough, I suppose,” Tsuga said. She kept her vines still, not wanting her irritation at the Captain for taking Cass away to show.

“Under the circumstances?” Andoa added, eir vines shifting in an inquisitive way.

“To put it mildly, yes,” Tsuga admitted. “I…I miss her.”

“Of course you do,” Andoa said, a few of eir vines reaching up to stroke Tsuga comfortingly. “I’ll admit, part of why I’m here is just to check up on you, but I also want to bring you up to date personally on some new developments that I think you’ll be interested in. May I come in?”

Tsuga’s needles riffled — she’d completely lost track of where the conversation was taking place. “Of course,” she said, stepping out of the way. “Mineral water?”

“You know the way I like it,” Andoa said, grinning.

“Hard as it comes,” Tsuga said. “Right.” When she returned with the tumbler of water, she found Andoa seated on her sofa, arms spread across the back. She offered it to em, and e took it with a grateful nod, cradling it in knot of vines.

“Marvelous,” e said, slowly draining the glass. “Much appreciated. Have you been keeping up on the figures from the evacuation?”

“Only very vaguely,” Tsuga said, taking a seat next to em. “Estimated 10% at this point?”

“A little higher now, but close enough,” Andoa replied. “It’s more a question of the individuals we’ve been able to take off the surface. Before I get into that, though…” E grinned, wide and toothsome, the golden arcs in eir eyes flashing. “Do you want to see something that will, I’m sure, make you terribly jealous?”

“I’m not entirely sure what you mean,” Tsuga said.

“Well, perhaps it’s best I just *show* you, then,” e said. E began to unravel emself, splitting down the middle beginning at the crown of eir head and slowly working downwards. The two halves of em began to push away from each other, as if the Captain was being slowly torn in two — and then, all of a sudden, Tsuga saw what e had meant, and e’d been right. She was *extremely* jealous.

Nell’s head and shoulders emerged from the thicket of vines, fronds, and moss that made up Andoa’s body, embedded in it, bound with her arms behind her back, her mouth gagged with a thick knot of vines so that she could scarcely even make a sound — all that came out as she tried to struggle was a muffled cry, somewhere between a frustrated shout and a whimper.

“Doesn’t she look absolutely *perfect?*” Andoa said, eir vines squeezing Nell and earning another whine. Nell’s eyes caught Tsuga’s, and they were full of anger and pleading all at once.

"…yes," Tsuga finally managed to say. She couldn't deny it — it was such a marvelous and ingenious way to tease a floret. "Has she been implanted?"

"Oh, no no no no *no*," Andoa purred. "We're doing this the *fun* way. Isn't that right, petal?" Nell made a pair of noises in short succession, as angrily as she could. "Oh, Nell, such language in front of Tsuga! Anyway, that comes *tonight*, my pet-to-be. I know you're excited to try again, but *patience*." E reached up with one soft, mossy hand and began to stroke her hair — it was so much fuller and glossier than it had been the last time Tsuga had seen her. She looked so much *healthier* overall, and it warmed Tsuga's core to see that she was being well taken care of. "Sssh, shhh. You know you can't get free, little one, so why struggle so much? Hmmm?" Eir vines tightened again, and Nell squealed helplessly.

Tsuga watched the display with a naked hunger in her heart. Things like this — an Affini playing with their floret — always gave her this feeling. Usually, without a pet of her own, the aimlessness of the desire simply made her miserable, but today that hunger found a target, and she found herself imagining Cass trussed up in such a fashion, Cass trapped like that inside her, squirming helplessly. "How, uhm.. how do you make sure she can breathe?" Tsuga managed to say.

"Oh, that's *easy*," Andoa said. "See this vine here, that crosses under her ribs? I can feel her diaphragm with that, every single breath. And these vines, up here by her nose? I can feel her actual breath across them, so I know her airway is clear." Without a face, e couldn't grin as a terran would, and so simply rippled eir vines, eir biorhythms thrumming in amusement. "Why, interested in some pointers? A lesson or two?"

"It…seems a bit advanced for me," Tsuga said. "And an awful lot of work."

"Oh, it *is*," e agreed, "but very much worth it. Don't be so hard on yourself, Tsuga, it's a skill that anyone can learn!" E began to knit emself back together, Nell shouting into the vine gag and struggling helplessly all the while until Andoa's torso finally closed around her again. "Aaaaah," Ando said as eir head came back together. "Nothing quite like having an adorable little xeno inside you."

"I'm glad to know she's safe and being taken care of," Tsuga said. "And I don't know if you've checked in recently, but Aletheia is coming along rather well. Already calling Pisca 'Mistress.'"

"The little red one?" E made a satisfied noise and relaxed back against the sofa. "We have the best job in the universe, you know that?"

"It does have its rewards," Tsuga agreed. She paused for a moment, then added, "I take it this means that Cass's information is of somewhat less importance?"

"Well, little Nell hasn't told me *too* much yet, but we'll get there. Yes we will," e said, grinning down at eir chest. "You can wiggle all you want, petal, but you're not going anywhere." E glanced back up at Tsuga. "But you are right. I think we'll get more out of her sooner than we will with Cass."

“So we can cancel the wardship, then?” Tsuga worried she might sound too eager, but then again, she couldn’t afford to let such an opportunity to get Cass back — to get Cass *safe*, she told herself — go by without taking advantage of it.

“You really *do* want her back,” Andoa said. “Good. Then file that Notice of Intent to Domesticate, and we’ll get her right back to you — just as soon as Polyphylla finishes her evaluation. She *is* a feralist, you know. We can’t have her marching about the ship, crying ‘Florets of the *Tillandsia* unite! You have nothing to lose but your owners!’ Imagine how *scared* the poor little dears would be to hear something like that.”

“Well…” Tsuga couldn’t deny that Andoa was right — that *did* sound like something Cass would say. “Nevertheless, I have high hopes that spending more time with Leah, and hearing more about her from Polyphylla, might convince her to relent just a bit on the subject of florets — and that *is* her one, big complaint about the Compact.” With any luck, Polyphylla had taken her advice on that score. There was no way Cass would retain her animus about domestication once she learned just much love and care went into Polyphylla’s efforts to help Leah.

“You think if she comes to terms with the taking of florets, she’ll be alright on her own?” Andoa said, raising one mossy eyebrow.

“In all other respects, her politics align well with ours.”

“The same is true of little Nell here, and look what I’m having to go through with her, hmm?” e said, patting eir chest. “What a little *fighter* she is,” e added with a hungry undertone. “Oh, I just can’t wait for tonight. And I bet she can’t, either.” E chuckled and rose to eir feet. “Which is something I should go and start setting up. I’m glad to see you’re handling this brief separation well, though. A lesser Affini might have gone entirely to pieces in a situation like this.”

“It’s not as if Cass is my floret,” Tsuga said quietly, ignoring the twinge in her core.

“Not yet, anyway,” Andoa replied. “But all things in time, Tsuga.” E hesitated. “If you need anything, even something as simple as company, please reach out.”

“Thank you,” Tsuga said, after a moment’s consideration. “But I think I’ll manage.”

She remained seated, long after she and Andoa made their respective goodbyes, staring into the unseen distance. The hab was still and silent again. *I can endure this*, Tsuga told herself. She had endured it for Blooms. She could endure more.

Go to her and take her, her core whispered, like the echo of her own biorhythms against the walls, millions of years of instinct unwilling to play along. *She needs you. Give her the joy and relief she deserves*.

Tsuga found that she had no answer, no way to contradict that voice from inside. She *wanted* to take Cass, wanted to hold her close and never let her go, to ease the hurts she hid deep inside herself, to give her happiness unlike any she’d ever experienced before. Cass deserved it. She *needed* it. All that stood between the two of them was her own fear. Fear that she

would make a mistake, fear that her inexperience with terrans would sour the entire relationship, fear that she simply wasn't *good* enough for such a wonderful, magnificent little creature like Cass.

I want her, she thought. *I'm afraid to take her, but I want her. And she doesn't want to be taken, but she may need not have a choice, and she may well need it*.

She would need to think on this some more. There had to be a solution — there was *always* a solution.

Chapter End Notes

Ooooooof. There. Turned the corner on the really rough stuff. This chapter took a lot out of me, but I'm finally free... to write more, hahaha.

And hey, if you're having self-harm thoughts? Please check in, either with friends, family, or a helpline. Please get help, however you need to. You are loved, you deserve to be loved, and you deserve to have someone listen to you.

Chapter 21: Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

> For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

> Last chapter we got Sad Leah. I wonder what comes after that?
> Content Warning: implied trauma flashbacks, overwhelming hopelessness, and emetophobia (minor, but covering my bases here)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> Hey, I'm not interrupting anything, am I?

<UnearthedHope> No, of course not. It's nice to hear from you. I haven't heard back from Polyphylla, so I'm assuming she's been explaining things to you?

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> Uh. That's one way to put it, yeah.

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> You know about Leah, right?

<UnearthedHope> I know about her, yes. I told Polyphylla she should explain, that it might help you understand what she's trying to do a bit better.

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> No, I get that, she did, but you know about Leah, right? That she had a meltdown last night?

<UnearthedHope> Oh. No, no I hadn't. Are you okay? Do I need to come over? Does Polyphylla need help with anything? Her last episode was prior to my arrival on the Tillandsia but she has spoken about it to me about Leah's difficulties before so I believe I have a fairly good idea of what may have happened.

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> Polyphylla wants to keep things quiet for a day or two for her, so… probably not.

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> Believe me I would rather have you here. Polyphylla has cooled off a lot from before, but at least some of that is just her worrying about Leah and not having the emotional bandwidth to give a shit about the feral terran.

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> But I get why she worries. And I get why she wants to let Leah have space to recover.

<UnearthedHope> I see. Very well. It is still very nice to hear from you. Can we continue to converse on here, if my presence there would be unhelpful?

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> I'd like that, yeah. Once she gets some more sleep Leah's probably going back on the table, so there's not a lot for me to do besides browse your net.

<UnearthedHope> I'm glad you're feeling more comfortable, at least. Do you have a better appreciation of what domestication entails now?

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> I'm never going to be okay with it, Tsuga. Like, yes, in Leah's case…I see why she wants it, I don't judge her for that, and I don't think it's wrong for her to get care she needs. But not every terran is Leah! Most of us are still capable of dealing with our own problems.

<UnearthedHope> From what I've seen, I'm not sure that's the case. Collectively, your species seemed to have had a great deal of problems you were unable to solve.

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> Yeah, and the vast majority are rooted in capitalism, which you fixed. Look, I don't mean to be an asshole, but can we talk about literally anything else? I just need a break. I need to process this before I can debate it.

<UnearthedHope> Of course. I'm sorry for making you uncomfortable.

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> You didn't, and it's important, and we should absolutely talk about it. But not right now, ok?

<UnearthedHope> I understand. It's probably something better discussed in person, anyway.

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> Yeah. Maybe in a couple days, when Leah's more stable. She's doing better, but she's still a little shaky around the edges. At least, I think that's what Polyphylla was implying. She claims to be watering down the jargon for me, but I'm not so sure.

<UnearthedHope> She can be like that, yes. She's a very impressive mnemonic engineer, though, especially for someone so young.

<PropagandaOfTheDeed> Young, in this case, meaning "only about as old as some of the books I've recommended to you."

<UnearthedHope> Youth is relative.

The next few days followed a similar routine for Cass. She and Leah would wake together, cuddle for a bit, and eat a hearty breakfast with Polyphylla. Then, Polyphylla would bathe Leah separately, so she could enjoy her xenodrugged shampoo, before taking her to her office to begin working on her again. Cass would bathe after that, then largely have the day to herself until Polyphylla brought Leah back up and made dinner in the late afternoon. Leah's

mood and stability improved day by day, first spacier and clingier than Cass had ever seen her, then slowly regaining her usual joie d'vivre, until by the fourth day she was more or less herself again.

Herself again. Cass couldn't deny it anymore — she'd seen Leah at her worst, when all of Polyphylla's programming had begun to fall apart and eat itself, and even then she'd still been *her*. True, Polyphylla had removed a significant chunk of Leah's memory, but then, there were things Cass wished she could forget too, and things she'd buried so deeply she very nearly had. Would forgetting those things change who she was? Would that change be so bad, even if it did? The question ate at her, the one knot in the tapestry of questions she couldn't quite untangle.

She could answer for Leah, at least, if not for herself. Finally seeing that lighthearted, unconcerned smile again after several days of a strangely cautious and hesitant Leah had given Cass nearly as much relief as it had Polyphylla. *She wanted this. She asked for this. Now she has it*. Every careful touch, every kiss, every moment spent snuggling drove the understanding home: what had been done to Leah was not abuse — it was repairing what abuse had done to Leah. As drastic as it was, as horrifying as it sounded and seemed in a vacuum, seeing it happen in real time as Polyphylla reestablished her equilibrium made it clearer than any words could: Leah needed this, and it was a good thing that she had it.

And yet, Cass couldn't seem to find a way to square what she knew about Leah with what she knew about the Affini, or about herself. They wanted to domesticate *her*, and even if she didn't need it, they weren't interested in listening. She wasn't like Leah — yes, she'd seen some pretty awful things in her life, endured things that had broken her in no few ways for a while, but she had grown past those hurts, put herself back together, and emerged stronger for it. She didn't need someone to reach into her head and tinker with her memories to make a theoretically better version of her. She was the Cass she needed to be, and that others needed her to be. Cutting away the parts of her that hurt would be undercutting the parts that let her be that Cass, and she'd collapse the minute she was needed most. Too many people were counting on her, and she couldn't betray them like that.

It wasn't until Tsuga arrived on the fourth day that her thought-spiral was meaningfully interrupted. Leah was having her first lazy morning in several days, with Polyphylla observing her instead of actively working on her mind. She and Cass were lying in a bed of flowers together, cuddling and watching clouds go by, when the hab announced Tsuga's arrival. "Hey cuties, guess who's here?"

"Bet that's Tsuga," Cass said, pushing herself up into a sitting position. "Okay if I go say hi?"

"Mmmyeah," Leah said, biting her lip and playing with a flower, feeling its texture with her fingertips — she was still good and buzzed on Class-As from her bath.

"Okay," Cass said, leaning down and giving her a quick kiss. "Have fun with that." Leah let out a giggle that bubbled up into a laugh as Cass made her way to the hab's entryway. The door slid open and there Tsuga stood, and Cass felt a wave of relief wash over her. "Hey," she said with an honest smile.

“Hey,” Tsuga said. It *was* Tsuga, but something about her was off, a subtle difference in her shape — a little more humanoid than it had been before, legs a little more trim, the foliage around her head a little more like an actual hairstyle (Very butch. Cass approved.). And had she gotten taller? “How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay. But I am really glad to see you — I guess I just got used to having you to argue about things with, huh?” Cass’s scalp tightened, one of the many ways her internal heuristic for Not Fucking Up Conversation was politely informing her that this might have been just a tad too much to lead with. *Pivot! Pivot!* “I, uh… I like what you’ve done with your hair.”

“…I don’t have hair?” Tsuga said, confused.

“No, I know, I just mean–“ *Thanks, brain. More like that.* “You look different, that’s all.”

“Ah, that. Yes, I’ve been working on refining this shape so that it looks a bit more terran-y. Moving mass around, getting used to it, rediscovering a sense of balance. It’s rather more… bipedal than I’m used to. I feel *very* top-heavy, as if I’m about to fall over.”

“Well, you look plenty graceful to me,” Cass said. “Come on in. Leah’s high as a kite and doing fine.”

“I am very glad to hear that,” she said. “Ah, Polyphylla, hello,” she added as they entered the common clearing, where Polyphylla was gently tickling Leah.

“Tsuga, there you are,” she said, continuing to play with Leah, who squirmed and giggled as she rolled around in the flowers. “Thank you for coming by. I know Cass has been looking forward to this.”

“As have I,” Tsuga said as she walked across the room — slowly, Cass noticed, so as not to make her have to jog to keep up with her long strides. “And Leah, is her… ah, the, uhm…” She added a quick bit of Affini to the end her sentence.

“Mnemonic equilibrium,” Polyphylla supplied, smiling. “And yes, *much* better. Not *quite* ideal, but we’ll see if she can’t get on-nominal by herself.” She scooped Leah up into her arms and stood. “She’s a tough little cutie. I think she can manage it. Isn’t that right, sweetling?”

“Yes, Mistress!” Leah managed to say through her gigglefit.

“Good, good,” Tsuga said, smiling and stroking Leah’s hair. Now that she was standing next to Polyphylla, Cass could definitely mark the difference in her height — she’d always had nearly a head (an Affini head, at that) on Polyphylla, but now she might have been a third of a meter taller, maybe even half a meter. It was dizzying. “Do you mind if we have a moment together?”

“No, of course not. Come on, Leah, let’s go have a snuggle party, and maybe a nap, and let Cass and Tsuga catch up!” She gave the (still giggling) girl a squeeze and spun her around, earning a squeal of delight as she she carried her off to one of the other room. Soon the

common clearing was silent save for the natural sounds of the forest and the gentle thrumming that Cass couldn't help but pick up from Tsuga.

"So," Tsuga said, kneeling down and smiling. Cass still had to look up at her, but at least she didn't have to crane her neck quite so much. "How are you holding up? You said things have been better between you and Polyphylla, but there's more to well-being than that."

"I'm fine," Cass said. "Just… I would really like this bullshit to be over and done with. I don't particularly enjoy these sword of Damocles situations. That's… that means 'impending doom,'" she added, seeing the confused riffle of Tsuga's needles.

"Ah. Well, I wouldn't call domestication *doom* per se. You've had enough time with Leah to see that. That is– do you feel well enough to have this conversation?" Her eyes flickered in waves of blue and indigo, and she wore a reasonable facsimile of an expression of concern.

"Yeah, I think so," Cass said. "And, yeah, like I said, I get why it *can* be a good thing. Leah needed help, and she got it. Fine. I accept that. But I'm willing to bet that ninety-eight percent of the time, *my* take is the more accurate one. Power corrupts, Tsuga, and you have too much fucking power."

"I disagree vehemently on your characterization of domestication as something corruptive," Tsuga replied. She paused, and glanced to the floral sofa. "Shall we sit?"

"Sure," Cass said, following Tsuga over to the sofa and taking the proffered vine, using it as a stepping stone to haul herself up. "But I'm not wrong. This is absolutely a power thing. The Captain wants me to give up my comrades, and I'm being threatened with domestication if I don't comply!"

"… I will acknowledge that the Captain wants that information, but I think you are misunderstanding the motivation. E wants Polyphylla to get that information from you, yes, but doing so will *not* require domesticating you. And in any case, I don't believe that's nearly so pressing an issue for em at this point."

That sounds ominous as hell. "…what do you mean?"

Tsuga drummed her fingers on her knee for a moment, creating a series of staccato wood-clacking sounds. "Nell was brought in a few days ago."

Cass's heart plummeted, as if the world itself had dropped out from under her. "What?!"

"She's doing well, I've seen her," Tsuga said, a soothing tone to her voice that did nothing to help Cass's mood. "She was apparently found in a little tent somewhere in the valley east of the mountains. The Captain has been taking care of her since then, and e thinks she'll be willing to talk soon."

"Bullshit," Cass hissed. But she knew all too well that everyone cracked eventually, and she remembered how easily the Captain had gotten inside Nell's head over an insult. Her blood ran cold. "Don't tell me that bastard is already fucking with her mind again?!"

“No, I don’t believe so, actually,” Tsuga said. “It’s something of a point of pride for em, as I understand it — from what I’ve heard, anyway. E prefers to work without fascination, posthypnotic suggestions, or even most xenodrugs.”

“… you mean torture,” Cass whispered. Somewhere behind her eyes a black pit yawned wide, but she squeezed the feelings of terror back down until they were a tiny mote she could go back to pretending didn’t exist.

“What? No! No, of course not!” Tsuga said, openly horrified. “Cass, you can’t possibly think us capable of that sort of thing, can you?”

Cass stood firm, staring up at her, focusing on her chin to avoid her eyes. “Tsuga, if there is one thing I know about your people, it’s that every time I think I know what you’re capable of, I learn exactly how wrong I am.”

“We would *never* harm any being like that!” Tsuga said forcefully. “Surely you must understand we don’t have that kind of behavior in us! What the Captain is doing is more… psychological. I’m not an expert on eir particular methodology, but I think it’s clear e wants Nell to realize that we have your best interests in mind, and that struggling is not only futile but counterproductive to *both* our ends.”

“I want to see her,” Cass said. “I want to see her right now.”

“I’ll ask the Captain if that’s possible,” Tsuga said. “I promise. I’m sure it will be, but perhaps not immediately. She’s your friend, and you want to see her. No doubt she wants to see you, though I imagine she has rather a lot else on her mind at the moment…regardless, I can’t imagine the Captain would want to keep you separated long-term.”

“Is everything alright?” Polyphylla had returned, sans Leah. “I heard raised voices.”

“It’s fine,” Tsuga said. “I was just passing the news to Cass that Nell’s aboard and with the Captain.”

“Aaah,” Polyphylla said, nodding. “Well, that explains that. Please don’t be worried, Cass, the Captain is really very gentle.”

“Oh, good, a gentle brainscrambling,” Cass said, laying the sarcasm on as thick as she could.

“And we were making such progress,” Polyphylla sighed. She crossed the room and sat on the sofa, trapping Cass between her and Tsuga. “I thought you were over this idea of domestication as a bad thing.”

“For Leah, maybe. Not for Nell, and definitely not for *me*.” She edged a bit closer to Tsuga.

“Well, Nell will likely have a very different opinion soon,” Polyphylla said, “so I suggest you prepare yourself for that. As to your case, well, that remains to be seen. And that is something I would like to talk to you about. Tsuga suggested I leave the issue alone until we could both be here, because she felt it would help you feel less threatened.”

"…I already don't like where this is going," Cass said, her skin prickling. Suddenly she felt as if there'd been a tiger loose in the room the entire time, and she'd only just noticed it as it was getting ready to pounce.

"It's alright," Tsuga said. One of her vines coiled around Cass's waist; she leaned into it, and it tightened around her gently. "We've been talking over the last few days, Cass, and we have a proposal for you. We'd like to run it by you, if that's alright."

"If you sold me out, Tsuga–" Cass began, glaring up at her.

"I wouldn't know the first thing about selling anything," Tsuga said. "Please. Let's talk."

Cass was still for a long moment. "Fine. What is this big plan of yours?"

"You'll recall that I spoke to you about your psyche map," Polyphylla said. "Mnemonic landmarks and so forth?"

"Yeah, I remember," Cass said. "And you explained Leah's, and what you did to her. Just because I've seen you do it doesn't mean I want it myself."

"That's not what I want to talk to you about," Polyphylla said. "This is purely about my evaluation of you for the wardship, and how I would like to approach that. The trouble with observing you is that you have a very strong feral persona — not your baseline personality, to clarify, but the version of yourself that you present to the world around you. I'm not saying that you're evasive," she added. "Most people maintain a persona to one degree or another. In your case, you're highly guarded, even hypervigilant, in a way that suggests no small amount of past trauma without necessarily offering any clues to what that trauma might be."

Cass shivered. She was doing the creepy mind-reading thing again. "That's my own business, not yours."

"It *is* my business for the purposes of the wardship. I know you have very little trust in me, and I accept that. I made some…missteps when we started out–"

"That's putting it mildly," Cass growled, shooting a dirty look up at her.

"–but I'd like to think we've made up ground on that," she went on. "I would like to do what we call a mnemonic regression on you. Think of it like a guided tour of your past — we'll sift directly through your memories while you're in a trance state. With that information we can complete an accurate psyche map–"

"Absolutely *not!*" Her heart rate practically doubled on the spot as fear swelled up inside her until she thought it might block her airway.

"–and Tsuga has offered to chaperone, with a promise to stop me from making any changes to your memory or cognition beyond those necessary for the regression itself," she finished. "Not that I would *do* that, but for your own comfort."

"Why in the world do you think I'd be okay with that?" Cass said, whirling around to stare up at Tsuga. Her gut churned, and her hands had tightened into fists of their own accord.

“Cass, if Polyphylla can’t make a solid recommendation that you be allowed to remain independent, she’s going to have to recommend you for domestication,” Tsuga said gently. “I know you don’t like the idea, but it’s your best hope of getting what you want.”

“And what if you get in there, dig up things that should stay buried, and decides, *oh no, this one’s too broken?*” she spat. She turned back to Polyphylla. “Where is the line drawn? Is it just your subjective decision? Because forgive me if I don’t trust you to make that in good faith considering your biological imperatives!”

“Please lower your voice,” Polyphylla said, her form tightening in a dangerous way even though her voice remained gentle. “Leah is asleep, but if you wake her up and upset her, I will be *very* unhappy.”

Cass gritted her teeth. “Sorry. But I’m not wrong!”

“You have my word,” Polyphylla said evenly, “that if in the course of a mnemonic regression I find sufficient evidence that you are not a danger to yourself or to others, and that you are capable of slackening your feral persona given extended exposure to the Compact’s way of life, then I will recommend that you remain an independent sophont.”

“And you have my word,” Tsuga added, “that I will be there the entire time, watching over you.” There was something in her voice, an undertone or a resonance, that Cass felt like a gentle breeze. “Please,” Tsuga added, offering Cass another vine, held out in front of her.

Cass sucked in a breath, reached out, and took it. *They’re just going to do it anyway if you say no*, she thought. *Either before or after they seal your fate.* “Your word,” she said, looking up at Polyphylla. “If I’ve even got a toe over the ‘I can hack it’ line, you turn me loose.”

“If you prove not to be a threat to yourself or to others,” Polyphylla repeated, “and if I believe you are capable of relaxing your feral persona, then yes, I will recommend that you remain independent. You may still require some degree of observation, to ensure you don’t backslide, but you would not be under a wardship.”

“….” Cass reached out and took Tsuga’s vine in her hand. “Okay,” she said, squeezing it. “But don’t fuck me on this,” she added in a low whisper.

“I will do no such thing,” Polyphylla said, rising to her feet. “But I *will* give you two some more time alone together. I know Tsuga has been looking forward to that. I’ll go start preparations for the mnemonic regression. It won’t happen today, there’s too much to do, and I need to preload a series of control responses into your mind before we can put you under. Tomorrow, perhaps, for a first session, but we’ll see.”

“Thank you for all the hard work,” Tsuga said as Polyphylla walked away. “We very much appreciate it.” She sat there with Cass for a moment, then added, “May I?” as she lifted one enormous hand and hesitated. Cass nodded, and she gently settled it on Cass’s back, fingers weaving between arm and body to rest against her. She leaned into the comfortable weight and sighed, tension rushing out of her. “How are you feeling?”

“Honestly, not great,” Cass said. “I don’t like this idea. But I also know you’re probably right and it’s the only way I get out of this with my brain intact.”

“Your brain would stay intact regardless, Cass,” Tsuga said, giving her a gentle squeeze. “You know that.”

“Yes, yes,” Cass grumbled, “but not in a way that *matters*. I am the product of my experiences, Tsuga, good and bad, and I’ve become the person I am for a *reason*. I don’t *want* that to change.”

“For what it’s worth, I would prefer that outcome as well,” Tsuga said. “I think you are a marvelous little sophont, with a brilliant mind and a very strong drive to help others, and I would never want to change that about you. These are all good things, but we can’t allow those good things to come at the expense of your own well-being.”

“But I’m *fine*,” Cass protested. “I’m only here because the Captain is mad that I didn’t just roll over and do everything you all wanted the minute you showed up!”

“That is not entirely correct,” Tsuga said, “but I will admit that the Captain *would* like for you to tell us where the terrans down on the surface are hiding so we can help them, even if it’s not eir first priority for you any longer.”

“I can’t betray them like that,” Cass said, clenching her fists again. “They trusted me.” She froze, and stared up at Tsuga. “Don’t let Polyphylla go digging there!”

“I won’t,” Tsuga said, “though I think she’s going to be more concerned with less recent events, the formative ones for your feral persona.”

“I don’t have a *feral fucking persona,*” Cass said, heat rising in her neck and in her cheeks, scrabbling at her skull looking for ways into her head.

“It’s a technical term, not a value judgement.”

“Bullshit!” Cass slipped out from under Tsuga’s hand and stood up on the floral sofa, tugging her way free of the vine around her waist. “You *know* it’s bullshit, too! You see something you can’t have, and you decide, ‘well, actually, we can have it, because we say so.’”

“That is *not* accurate,” Tsuga said gently. “And you know that. Please calm down.” Tsuga offered the hand again, palm up. “Please. I know we’re ideologically opposed on this, but I’d rather we not let anger into this. We really are only trying to help you, to whatever degree you require it.”

Cass stared at the hand for a long second, then back up at Tsuga. “You really just do not get it,” she said quietly, shaking her head. “You just don’t *get* it.”

“I do get it. But I also get that often, sophonts don’t realize when they need help. That is, to be perfectly honest, as true for us as it is for you.” She leaned in a bit closer. “I am not,” she added, “particularly *well* for an Affini, as you may have noticed.”

“No one’s threatening to domesticate you,” Cass replied.

“No, but domestication isn’t something to threaten with, or to punish with. Leah is an extreme case, and even then you can surely see the love Polyphylla has for her.”

Cass shivered, the anger coalescing into a heavy lump in her stomach. “I know that,” she hissed, looking away. Tears began to well up, hot and insistent, in her eyes. “I know she loves her.”

“And if you do require domestication, your owner will love you just as powerfully,” Tsuga went on. She hesitated for a moment, then added, “And they would want you to feel the same way. To feel safe and comforted by their presence. To enjoy their company. Domestication is an act of love, Cass. I know you find it discomforting, even terrifying, on a conceptual level, but it is perhaps the purest act of love that exists.”

“Don’t say that,” Cass whispered, squeezed her eyes shut. *Don’t let it get to you. It’s just psychological warfare tactics she’s had culturally instilled into her. Don’t let it get to you!* The tears streamed down her cheeks, the salt taste catching on her lips.

“Please, come here,” Tsuga said, reaching out with her hand. Little vines slipped free of her fingers, gently probing as if to ask for permission. Unable to stop herself, Cass leaned into it, sucking in a deep, sniffling breath. She let Tsuga guide her back to her side, where she all but collapsed to her knees, crying. “Shhh,” Tsuga said, the gentle pressure of her hand pressing Cass against her. “You don’t have to be afraid. Think about it: we’ve domesticated every species we’ve come across. Every species we’ve ever met, we’ve found a way to love. Isn’t that a thing of transcendent beauty?”

Cass was beyond replying. *Are you seriously crying right now?* she shouted at herself in her head. *You can’t afford this! Stand up and fight, you coward! Are you going to let those bastards win? Are you going to stay broken, or are you going to fight?!* Somewhere in the back of her mind, she felt the deep, black pit yawning open again, and the ghostly sensation of fire crawling up her arms. *Fight! Back! Every hurt they did to you, pay them back tenfold! Tear the whole rotting edifice down!* Rage, frustration, and fear swirled together in an incomprehensible storm of emotion, and Cass rocked back and forth against Tsuga as she wrestled desperately with it, trying to force it back down.

And all the while, Tsuga held her, gently but tightly enough to always feel present, a comforting pressure. “I’m here,” she said, her voice rumbling in the gentlest tones that Cass could nonetheless feel throughout her entire body. “I’m right here, and I’m not going anywhere.” Every word, every syllable, was a drumbeat permeating her, that slowly but surely stilled the turmoil inside her. She breathed in time with the beat, and slowly her heart rate began to fall. “I’m here.”

“I’m…so fucking *scared*, Tsuga,” Cass managed to whisper. *Coward*, she told herself. *Coward! COWARD! You didn’t endure it all just to end up some pampered pet on a leash!*

“I know,” Tsuga said. “But it’ll be alright.”

“I can’t just give in,” Cass said, her voice catching on the sobs still lurking in her throat.

“You don’t have to, little one,” Tsuga replied, her voice soft and soothing, drawing more tears out of Cass. “Just be yourself. Just be Cass, and don’t worry about the details.”

“But what if you don’t let me?” she whimpered, pressing her face into Tsuga’s side. *Let? Let?!* The revulsion screamed up her esophagus as burning, sour bile that she only just managed to choke back down.

“Then you will be loved, and everything will be alright,” Tsuga whispered. “And if you do win back your independence, as I think you will? You will be loved, and everything will be alright. So don’t fret. Don’t fret, petal. I’ll be here for you, no matter what.”

Cass sucked in a shuddering breath and nodded. That, at least, she believed — Tsuga was the one Affini she trusted to say what she meant. *It’s out of my hands now*, she told herself. *I don’t have a way to stop this. All I can do is hope. Inshallah, I can get through this thing with my mind intact.*

But there was still a part of Cass, angry and spiteful, that held herself a coward and a failure for that kind of thinking.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Cass :(Just unclench, hon (she said, to her own fictional character that she is writing).

Speaking of writing, I had to rewrite this chapter completely because the first time I wrote it, it had no flow. Oof. At least it vaguely works now in the shape it's in, and now I can get to work on the next chapter, which I've been looking forward to writing. It's gonna be nice and weird.

Chapter 22: Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

In which we finally learn Cass's deal.

Content Warnings: Inability to distinguish reality, violence/gore, death (including offscreen death of a parent and discussion of it), carceralism & inhumane prison conditions, transphobia both external (misgendering) and internalized, torture, survivor's guilt. I *think* that's everything. **Please do not neglect these warnings,** this is probably the roughest chapter in the whole thing. Do not feel obligated to read the entire thing if it's too much.

There is a little bit of comfort at the end, too, because wow, this chapter needs it. If you want the Cass Experience of not knowing what just happened, skip right to the bottom and scroll up to the last divider, and read from there.

(Stars, I need to write something just absolutely disgustingly fluffy as hell once I'm done with this story.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The familiar smell of ozone and burning dust. The soft, almost imperceptible whine of hard drives being accessed. The blinking green lights lining every server rack. The Solstice Archives were a place of peace, a retreat from the screws and from the less tolerable of her fellow inmates. Free from her drunken supervisor’s interference as he slept off another night of wallowing in his perceived failure (a mere billionaire, marooned by his family at the far end of space), she made good use of the free time. Scattered on the desk in front of her were a dozen electronic components, stripped from “failed” servers and cobbled together in a new shape.

What are you building? The voice, which part of Cass distantly recognized as belonging to Polyphylla, seemed to emerge from the air itself.

“It’s a signal repeater,” she muttered as she soldered a circuit. “I’m going to hand it off to a comrade, and he’ll install it on the radio tower at Twin Creeks Station. Then we can talk to

Elysium without corporate snooping."

I see. This must be the Archives where you used to work, isn't it? What year is it?

What a stupid question, Cass thought. "It's 2544," she answered.

Alright, that gives us a baseline. Let's apply some light stimulus to get things moving. Cass, listen to my voice: Someone is knocking at the door. Who is it?

Suddenly, there was a loud knock on the door, as if someone had banged on it a single time. She froze, sweeping the electronics into a knapsack and folding it shut. Another single bang on the door came shortly thereafter.

"I'm coming!" she said. "It should be open!" She crossed the room to the emergency door and pushed it open, and only just ducked out of the way at the *snapcrack* of the gauss pistol in her face — at this range, it was still ferociously loud, leaving her ears ringing as she snapped the ziptie and seized the dead man's arm. They spun around, the pistol discharging three more times before Cass managed to tear it from his grasp. She lost her purchase on it, and it spun off into the grass.

"Fine, we just bleed you then!" he snarled, pulling a knife from his belt and lunging at Cass. She dodged the first slash, then the second, but the third caught her in the shoulder, digging in like a white-hot poker. She gritted her teeth and took the opportunity, locking the dead man's arm and getting a foot behind his, slinging them both to the ground. They tumbled down the hill, kicking, scratching, fighting over the knife, until they slammed up against a stump at the dead man let out a soft grunt. Cass disentangled herself from him, and saw the knife plunged into his chest — he was still alive, but dazed, feebly reaching up to paw at the handle.

"Don't," she hissed. "If you pull that out, you'll die." She got unsteadily to her feet, stumbling up the hill and snatching up the pistol, raising it and searching for the other dead man. It took her a moment to pick him out in the red-stained gloom, sprawled out with his brains spattered, black and thick in the dark, across the grass. *He must have caught one of the stray rounds*, she thought, clamping down on the sour taste in her mouth. *Poor bastard.*

The dead man at the bottom of the hill was still grasping at the knife when Cass got back to him. He tried to gurgle something, but only a trickle of blood and foam escaped the corner of his mouth. *Fuck*. *He's dead already*, she thought. "Listen," she said, grabbing one of the dead man's hands. "This is a lethal wound. I'm sorry. You're either going to bleed out, or drown in your own blood. Maybe slightly faster if you pull this out. Or I can make it quick," she added, holding up the pistol. His eyes focused on it and, after a heart-stopping minute, he nodded. Cass took aim, her stomach churning, and whispered, "I'm sorry," again, and pulled the trigger.

"Kill," Carver announced, muttering under his breath as Cass worked the action on her rifle, ejecting the spent shell. She heard it tumble against the cement floor, ringing softly, as she chambered the next round. In the distance, perhaps a third of a kilometer away through the broken basement window, she could see a man in body armor tumbling to the ground, a lowest-bidder helmet having failed to stop her bullet. "Good shot. Why'd you pick that one?"

“The others treated him like an officer. Screws don’t salute, but it’s still obvious.” She watched the team of guards scrambling to take cover. The shot would have pinned them down fairly effectively anyway, but the disarray of a dead leader was a good bonus. She forced her gut to stillness. It was a practiced response; there would be time enough to be sick at what she’d just done later. Revolutions were never bloodless. “We should move.”

What’s going on? Another voice — Tsuga? What was she doing here? She wasn’t going to get to Solstice for years yet. She pushed the thought aside; no time to woolgather in a combat zone.

She’s free-associating, connecting one memory to another. We can expect to jump around a bit chronologically, but mnemonic pathways tend to have a single thread connecting them all. This one seems to be associated with inflicting violence. Some interesting biofeedback, there. Let’s keep going.

“We’re not going to find a better position,” Carver argued, lowering the binoculars and leaning away from the window. He scratched his thin, scraggly trench beard. “You can pick off another couple, easy.”

“And if they aren’t running audio vectoring software, another shot will let their brains do the zeroing in for them anyway,” Cass replied, sliding off the top of the washing machine and landing on the floor as quietly as she could. “We’re moving. Come on.”

“Alright, you’re the big revolutionary,” he said, shrugging and following her as she turned and marched up the metal stairs. Dust swirled in the rudely carved shelter as she emerged onto the hillside, sheltered under a broad sheet of muslin stitched over with local plant life — such as it was, anyway. The shoreline wasn’t far off, but Bandirma was still a dry and miserable place to be. At least it only rarely flirted with the wet-bulb danger zone, and at night it was almost livable.

“Good, there you are,” Ashtî said, waving Cass over. She was almost invisible in the shadows, just a dark shape. “I just got the signal. See, there?” She pointed at a light, waving gently back and forth from a rooftop in the old city — the part that hadn’t been flooded out long ago, anyway. Beyond that, the lights of the Marama Logistics Complex sparkled on the horizon. “They’ve pulled everyone out, just like you said they would.”

“There’s been enough sabotage over the years,” Cass said, shrugging. “Stands to reason they’d assume this was no different, and clear out the ‘suspects’ to prevent them from doing anything else.”

What language is that?

Let me pull up the translator. This happens sometimes with multilingual subjects.

“So, we’re looking at what, EOD, maybe a couple OCNI ghouls if we’re lucky?” She nodded. “I can live with that. Are you ready? The sooner we go, the more likely this is to work.”

“I know,” Cass said, trying her best to sound determined, but there was a lump in her stomach, rolling back and forth like a ship at sea. She hadn’t eaten anything all day and she *still* felt like she was going to vomit. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, Layla,” Ashtî said, offering Cass a hand. She took it, hesitantly, feeling the older woman’s rough skin on her own. “I was going to ask if you wanted to do the honors, but maybe I should–“

“No, let me,” Cass said, steeling herself. “For Mother.”

Ashtî watched her for a long moment in silence. Cass glanced over at her, and their eyes met. The old eyes, hatched with crows’ feet, the eyes that had seen too much, had a bright spark in them. “For Shirîn,” she whispered. “We’ll do it together, then.”

This is a much earlier memory, I think. Cass, is this Terra?

“Of course it’s Terra,” she muttered, squinting at the horizon as Ashtî held out a remote switch. Cass nodded, reaching out with her own hand, flipping up the safety and putting her thumb on the button. Ashtî did likewise. “On three? One…two…*three*.” They both pushed together, and Cass felt the little click as the contacts met.

There was a terrible moment when nothing happened, when she thought something might have gone wrong — then, on the horizon, there was a light amidst all the others that flared brightly before it was joined by others, and more and more until the entire thing was a massive fireball of fusion remass lighting up the sky above the Sea of Marmara. It took thirty seconds for the rumbling, thunderous sound of the explosion to reach them, a hot *slap* of wind Cass could feel on her skin. The heat became a tingle, which became a burning on her arms, and the light faded far quicker than it should have. The night reconquered Cass’s sight in record time, as if she were flashblind, and still the burning grew sharper and sharper until she could no longer hold back the screams.

“Stop, stop! Whatever you’re doing, stop it!” Tsuga cried as she held Cass’s thrashing body down. The little terran’s voice was one long, crackling scream, her back arched up off the desk, and though the visor on the apparatus strapped to her head hid her eyes, Tsuga was sure she hadn’t blinked once since she’d entered this state. Above her, the screens were a wild jumble of visual noise.

“We’ve hit a major trauma,” Polyphylla said, vines tapping away at a control panel. “She’s getting lost in it instead of processing it. I’m giving her a microdose of Class-B to break her loose, and we’ll walk back from there and reapproach after I stabilize her.” As she said it, Cass slacked in Tsuga’s arms, though she still gasped for breath, whimpering something under her breath in a language she didn’t understand. “Cass, listen to my voice: Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand–“

“And Eternity in an hour,” Cass muttered back as she went absolutely limp.

<Good, the conditioning is still holding,> Polyphylla said, nodding and tapping in a few more notes.

<You want to *keep going?*> Tsuga stared at her, vines twisting into knots inside her. <After that?!>

<It's not ideal, of course, but she's out of that memory now,> Polyphylla said. <And I have a good idea of where to plot it on her psyche map. Once we sketch out more of it, isolate it, we should be able to find a way to approach it in a safer fashion, or skirt it if need be.>

<And if not?> Tsusa rumbled, one hand gently cradling Cass's head. <What then?>

Polyphylla reached out and coiled a comforting vine around Tsuga. <It's already in her head. It has to be dealt with, one way or another, sooner or later. We both know that.>

<I don't want to see her like that again,> Tsuga said. She watched as Cass's breathing slowed to the same, easy rhythm from before. At least it was over for now.

<I've seen Leah like that more times than I can count.> Polyphylla said quietly, <She doesn't scream quite like that, but no two traumas are identical. In any case, I feel the same way you do now every time — but it's necessary to keep her balanced and healthy. This may hurt to watch, but it's part of the process of helping Cass, both to pursue her goal of remaining independent and also to treat these very traumas we're running headlong into.>

<I know that,> Tsuga murmured. <I know that.>

<She'll be alright. I *promise*.> Tsuga looked up, meeting Polyphylla's eyes, and saw at once the intensity of her look — she meant every word.

<…alright,> Tsuga said. *This is for Cass*, she told herself. *She wants to be independent, and this is how she gets there.* <Keep going.>

Polyphylla nodded, turning back to the controls. "Now Cass, listen to my voice…"

Cass couldn't move, couldn't see. She felt as if she'd been lying down for hours, even days, strapped to a table or a board or *something*, her mind wheeling as she re-emerged from… from *nowhere*, a hole in her memory and her sense of place. *Where am I?* she thought, and immediately she knew the answer. A klaxon cut through the silence, and red lights flickered at the corner of her vision. A loud voice, flanged by the feedback from a speaker, intoned "Cargo, prepare for transfer to the surface," in the most bored voice imaginable. The lights came up, white and painful, crawling up the long axis of the ship, revealing row after row of cells, eight by three feet, stacked one on top of each other on three of four surfaces — each with a prisoner strapped down, plugged into half a dozen medical devices. Part of Cass's brain rebelled each time she saw it, her inner ear never quite growing accustomed to the impossible view, but at least she'd stopped throwing up every morning by the third day out from Terra.

Transportation: a euphemistic term for two solid weeks of torture as the Osborne-Clark freighter jumped repeatedly for the far rim of the Accord, beyond the Radcliffe Wave, to a little slice of hell called Solstice. One hour of carefully monitored and incredibly strenuous physical activity a day, all mandated by O-C suits who wanted prisoners ready to work on the

far end, followed by twenty-three hours strapped in your pod, half-sedated — guards, and the things needed to keep them alive, represented mass, and every iota of mass that wasn't a prisoner being shipped out for indentured labor was wasted profit. Cass had been counting faces, and she was sure there were no more than six aboard the ship. There was no way they could hold the ship against them if she could just get herself free.

Unfortunately, the guards knew that too, and so were meticulous in checking every strap, every feed, each and every time they brought Cass out for exercise or put her back. This time was no different — they came, unhooked her, manacled her hands and feet, and maneuvered her down the central axis of the ship to the shuttle, where they strapped her in again, this time upright at least, alongside another convict. He was about Cass's height, a bit older, his shaved head coming in dark-haired, with two weeks of scraggly beard growth — *Thank God I got the electrolysis done before this,* she thought. He glanced over her at once the guards were gone, and asked, "So…what'd they throw you in for?"

At least, that's what she thought he said. Cass had studied Standard English with her father, read plenty of books in English, and plenty of television was in English — more than there was in Standard Arabic, that was for sure — but while she could read it just fine, she hadn't had much occasion to *speak* the language until she'd been ground through the gears of the Accord's legal system. Something dark and terrible yawned behind her, the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end like something with hot, stinking breath had just exhaled, hot and wet, behind her. *Don't think about it, don't think about, don't think about it*, she told herself. *Fight back. Fight back. Fight! Back!* "Marama," she said, swallowing against a dry throat. She'd scarcely said ten words the entire trip out — conversations between inmates were practically impossible when you as doped-up as they left you. "The Marama Logistics Complex."

He was silent for a moment, staring at her. "*You* blew up the Marama Logistics Complex? Holy shit, I heard about that! They said it was communist radicals."

"Anarcho-communist," she replied, staring across the interior of the shuttle at the empty racks on the far side, still awaiting their prisoners.

"Ho-lee shit," he repeated. "Well, fuck, you got me beat. I just conned the wrong rich asshole. Name's Carver. Burt Carver. You?"

"Layla Al-Tabari."

"Well, nice to meet you, Layla," he said, angling his head to peer down towards the airlock. "And based on how long it took you to get here after me, I'd say we've got about five more minutes to talk before the screws get back, so: communism, huh? Never thought I'd meet an *actual* communist, I gotta say. Kinda curious what makes you tick!"

She shrugged, as much as she was able. "Would that Capital had but one neck," she paraphrased, smiling a bit at the irony of quoting Caligula for such a purpose. When she saw that Carver clearly had no idea what she meant, she added, "If you really want to know, it's going to take a lot more than five minutes."

He laughed. "Lady, we have *plenty* of time."

And they did. Between visits from the guards, she gave him a brief overview of anarchist thought, starting simple and drawing mainly on Berkman. A few of the other prisoners were listening intently by the time the shuttle undocked, a gentle lurch that ran through Cass's entire world.

Interesting. She's never mentioned this Carver person before, but this is the second time he's come up. I'm going to mark that as a subject to revisit, but let's give this a gentle nudge. Cass, listen to my voice: what happened next?

Freezing cold, the burning, stinging chemicals pelted Cass from every direction as she walked through the narrow, blue-lit corridor. She wanted to scream, wanted to cover her face, but the guards had made it entirely clear that if she lowered her arms at any point, there would be Consequences. At some point, the chemicals became water, and then jets of uncomfortably hot air. She'd already had her hair shaved off before the trip, or whatever was in those chemicals would surely have ruined it. Her eyes still stung as another pair of guards, brandishing stun batons, directed her to pick up a jumpsuit.

"Shit, look at that," one of them, the younger, said, staring at Cass's naked body. "Which line do we send …*it* down?"

"Fuck if I know," the older one muttered. "Or care. Hey, freak, which line?"

Cass glared at him as she pulled on the jumpsuit. "I'm a woman," she said, and followed it with a muttered, "shit-smelling son of a dog," in Arabic.

"Don't you give me a look like that or I'll crack your fuckin' skull," he said, gesturing with his baton. "Right side door, hands on head, line up with the others."

Your time will come, Cass though, still glaring as she zipped up the jumpsuit, put her hands on her head, and marched off down the right-side hallway. She emerged into a courtyard where half a dozen women and about twenty men were lined up on opposite sides. She didn't stand there for long; only a few more filtered in after her. On a catwalk above, half a dozen guards with automatic rifles patrolled back and forth. She spotted Carver on the far side, and they exchanged glances as a burly guard walked into the courtyard, immediately launching into what had to a speech he'd given a hundred times, judging by the cadence.

"Welcome to Solstice, Scum!" he said, his voice loud and gravelly. The capital letter on "Scum" was easily audible. "Your mothers may have given you names when you were regrettably born, but all that has been washed away with the rest of the filth you tracked in here! You are Scum now, and Scum belongs to the Company! Scum *works* for the Company, which means you work for *me*, which means you will work *hard* and you will *behave*. Now then," he added — and this was clearly a departure from prepared remarks. "We have a *celebrity* among us today. You there!" He gestured to Cass with his chin. "Step forward!"

Hesitantly, Cass did so. "Come on, come on," he said. "Out in the middle where everyone can see you. *This*, Scum, is the communist filth that cost our Cosmic Navy *trillions* in damages, possibly *quadrillions*, with a single, stupid, *pointless* act of sabotage, all in the name of, if you can believe it, the cause of *Rinan Independence*." He laughed, a sick and cruel sound that hunkered down somewhere deep in his chest. "That's right! All that for a bunch of fucking

furballs who can scarce weld two bits of pipe together without blowing themselves to Kingdom Come! Well, never say we here at Solstice don't appreciate *effort*, sister! Take a bow!" Cass felt certain this was a setup for some kind of trick, and furthermore, wasn't entirely sure what a few of the words the man had used even *meant*, so she remained still. She felt the *swish-crack* of the baton striking her left knee, and she collapsed and fell almost instantly — "I *said*, take a bow!" — and then, the tip of the baton stabbed in, arcing through the jumpsuit to her skin and making every muscle in her body snap painfully taut. She couldn't move, she couldn't struggle, she couldn't even *breathe*. The man was talking again, but she could only catch snatches of words through the pain — "*This* is what happens to saboteurs on *my* planet," seemed to be the refrain, each statement punctuated with another long, searing jab with the baton. Behind her eyes, as the red crept in, there was a darkness growing, and even though she couldn't be, she heard herself screaming clear as day.

Polyphylla, it's happening again!

I know! Give me a moment, I'll redirect. Pushing Class-B. Cass, listen to my voice: Hold infinity in the palm of your hand–

"And Eternity in a hour," she muttered as the pain slipped away, along with the courtyard, along with *everything*. Relief flooded her, and she felt herself crying, the hot tears on her cheeks running sideways as if she were lying down. But why *was* she crying? It didn't seem so important anymore — if she couldn't remember it, it probably wasn't.

Cass, we're going somewhere else now, alright? Tell me about Ashtî, Cass. Who is Ashtî?

"Mother's friend," she mumbled, wiping the sweat from her brow. Even though the fabric stretched overhead, the souk was horribly hot, all of Zerqamîsh settled into the midday rest, when it became too hot to work — all save for her. The hijab itched, too, loose as she wore it, the ends of her still-too-short hair hanging around her chin. She still wasn't used to the sensation of the fabric when it brushed against her neck. It did nothing for the heat, either; even the breeze blowing down the souk was like staring into an oven. As quickly as she could, she made her way to the turning, slipped down a side alley underneath a wider building, and found the door she knew led to Ashtî's home. She rapped on the door and waited, huddled against the wall of the entryway. Eventually, it slid out of the way.

"… Layla? What are you doing out at this time of day?" There stood Ashtî, wearing little more than a t-shirt and a pair of light trousers, her hijab hurried thrown on over her short hair. "Come in before you give yourself heatstroke!" She put an arm around Cass's shoulder and pulled her inside, tapping the control to seal the door. The air exchangers began to work, and the inner door opened a moment later, a blessedly cool rush of air greeting Cass. "Sit down, I'll get you some electrolyte water," she said as she pulled the hijab off and tossed it over a chair by the entryway. Her home wasn't large — just the common room, a kitchenette, and a bedroom and bathroom tucked away down a short hall — but it was comfy, and felt very lived-in. Cass always liked it here.

"Sorry, Auntie," she mumbled, rubbing her shoulder to wipe away the sensation of uncomfortable touch. She took a seat on a low sofa and undid her own hijab, more to remind herself that nothing was amiss. She still had the miserable reflex inside her that said there

was something wrong with her seeing a woman outside the family without something covering her hair. *There are no men here*, she reminded herself as Ashtî pressed a cool glass of something lemon-scented into her hands.

“Don’t you apologize to me,” she said softly. “I told you, you’re welcome in my home anytime. We may not be family, but…well, we’re as close as you can get otherwise.”

“Mother always said you were family,” Cass said, taking a sip of the drink and relishing in the feel of it slipping, cold and wet, down her throat.

“…yeah,” Ashtî said, looking away. “I bet she did.”

Cass said nothing for a moment, staring, until she realized what she’d said. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled again.

“Stop it,” Ashtî said, looking back at her. She reached out and put a hand on her leg. “What happened wasn’t your fault. Okay?”

“But it was,” Cass whispered, her eyes brimming over. It had been like this every since her mother had died, tears every day for two weeks. Papa said it was natural for a daughter to mourn her mother, but there was still that part of her that insisted it was wrong to cry for so long, that it showed weakness rather than grief. “I didn’t go with her. I could have done something, I could have done *anything*, but I didn’t!”

“Hey, hey! No. None of that,” she said, sliding over and embracing Cass as she began to weep into Ashtî’s shoulder. “Your mother was a clever, brilliant woman, and she made a choice knowing what the consequences might be, and much as we might wish we could change what’s happened, we can’t. I miss her too, baby, I miss her *so* much.” She squeezed Cass tightly. “But she would *not* want you to blame yourself for her decision.”

“I know, but–“ Cass sniffled and shook her head. “But I should have been there, I should have–“ She sniffled again, the sobs making any words impossible.

“Shhh. You had exams to study for, right?” Ashtî let go of Cass and leaned back. “And I know how important that was to her — that you do well in university, and you take over your father’s chair in the faculty.” Cass nodded. That was *exactly* what her Mother had said when she left that day — that she needed to do twice as well in the exams as she would have had to before in order to stand out, and that she was absolutely capable of it. So she had stayed home and studied with her father, and her mother had never come home.

“I should have been there,” she repeated in a strained whisper.

“No, baby, no,” Ashtî said, her own voice growing pained. “She wouldn’t have wanted you to see that.” She had been there, had seen it happen, had nearly suffered the same fate herself.

“I’m sorry,” Cass whimpered, trying to stand up, but Ashtî held onto her. “I shouldn’t be here, I should go, I’m sorry!”

“Sit *down*,” Ashtî said, in a very good emulation of her mother’s I Mean Business voice. She sat, instantly. “Layla, my darling, you are *always* welcome here, no matter what,” she said. “Look at me. I know you don’t like that, but *look*.” She waited until Cass forced herself to meet Ashtî’s eyes — they, like hers, had done no small amount of crying over the last two weeks. “I loved your mother,” she said, softly as she could. “And while we never spoke of it, I know she’d want me to be here for you. And, well, I’m sure she’d want you to be here for me, too,” she added. She closed her eyes (much to Cass’s relief) and sighed. “When you’re feeling a bit stronger, who knows. Maybe I’ll cry on you.”

Cass sniffled and wiped her eyes. “Mother always said she was the one who kept you from doing anything crazy.”

Ashtî laughed. “That sounds like Shirîn, alright,” she said, a wistfulness in her voice. “And she did. That protest was her idea; me, I wanted something with a little more…a little more *bang*, you know? Fireworks always get attention.”

It was manifestly clear that Ashtî was not talking about actual fireworks. Even Cass could tell that. So she swallowed, cleared her throat, and said, “Me too.”

Ashtî stared back. “No. Absolutely not.”

“If you don’t let me help, I’ll do it myself. Alone,” Cass said, meeting Ashtî’s stare unflinchingly. It was the only way she’d know how seriously she meant what she said.

“No,” Ashtî repeated. “I’m not– look, first of all, we don’t talk about that sort of thing here. Not in the city at all.”

“Then we go somewhere else to talk about it.”

“This isn’t what your mother would have wanted for you!” Ashtî protested. “It’s… it’s on my mind, yes, but Layla, sweetie…”

“She asked nicely,” Cass whispered, “and they murdered her for it. I don’t intend to ask nicely.”

The two women stared into each others’ eyes, and it burned and ached but Cass refused to be the first to look away. “Layla… this thing will eat your life if you let it,” Ashtî said softly, reaching out to put one hand on Cass’s. “She wasn’t lying when she said she kept me from doing crazy things. She was my *anchor*. She gave me a reason to want a life outside of it.”

“She gave me my life in the first place,” Cass replied, “and she gave her own life for the cause. What kind of a daughter would I be if I was afraid to follow her into the fight?”

“…God, you get that same look in your eye,” she said, shaking her head and smiling, letting her eyes slip shut. “You look so much like her, you know that? Even before, you took after her, but now…God, if I put you next to her at your age, I’d swear you were sisters.”

Cass’s cheeks flushed. It was one of the nicest things anyone had ever said to her, and it made her heart turn a little flip inside her. “Really?” she whispered, her eyes threatening to tear up

again.

Ashtî nodded and grinned. “Trust me, I spent a lot of time looking at your mother’s face.” She paused. “Hey, how’s your pop holding up? I know he’s just as gutted as we are, but… even if he was okay with me and your mom, I still feel a little weird just turning up over there. He’s a good man, and Shirîn loved him. I worry.”

“He’s…he’s okay,” Cass said. “He’s quiet. More than before, I mean. And he’s been cooking a lot.”

“Yeah, he does that,” she said, nodding. “He was the same way when his folks went, I remember. Will you say hi for me? And tell him that I’m here if he needs help?” Cass nodded. It would probably be a good thing for someone else to be keeping an eye on him — he wasn’t a young man anymore, and he never got enough sleep. “You should probably be getting home, anyway,” Ashtî added. “I wouldn’t want him to worry about you.’

“Okay,” Cass said. She finished her drink in one long pull, and set the glass down. “Thank you for listening,” she said as she donned her hijab again and stood.

“Always, kiddo,” she replied. “Always.”

“…and we’ll talk about the rest?”

Ashtî was silent for a moment, then nodded. “We’ll talk. I’ll let you know. In the meantime, you keep your head down, understand?”

“I will, Auntie,” Cass said. And she would. Cass wasn’t Auntie Ashtî, who needed a moderating influence to keep her cool — she was a slow-burning ember that would ignite a conflagration at just the right moment. Ideas were already spinning in her head, ways she could hurt the Accord, hurt its jackbooted thugs in the Cosmic Navy, hurt the Capital that buoyed it. As she keyed the door open, she there was only a single thought in her head. *I’ll fight back. I’ll get those fuckers for what they did, and I’ll make sure they never do it again. I’ll get those fuckers. Those fuckers. Those fuckers!* “Those fuckers!” she screamed as she kicked the door open and stalked into the hallway outside the conference rooms where the Landfall Revolutionary Council was being held. “Fucking statist shitbags, fucking reactionary dogshit!”

“Cass, wait up!” Carver was jogging after her. “Cass, you can’t just *walk out*.”

“I’m a *fucking anarchist*, Burt,” she snapped, not looking back. “I can do whatever the fuck I want!”

Alright, looks like we’re back to free-associating. Let’s see… Carver again?

“Cass, *come on*,” he said, finally catching up. “You didn’t seriously think they were gonna go for that, did you?”

“The Pan-Elysian Anarchist Confederation has the broadest support in the Elysium Valley and they’ve historically refused to be subordinated to any proposed central government, so

yes, I *did* in fact expect them to continue to respect our autonomy!"

"*Our* autonomy? Cass, you've spent probably 95 percent of the last twenty years here in Landfall."

"Well, according to those assholes, territorial claims are without merit, so who fucking cares!" she shouted, punching the elevator button hard enough that her fist ached after. "They're my people," she hissed, slowly swallowing her anger. "They trust me to represent them here, and to make it clear they have no interest in any kind of state oversight or control in the Valley, only solidarity and cooperation in mutual defense of the Revolution."

"And how exactly is that gonna happen without a government?" Carver replied. "Come on, Cass, it's a nice dream, but this reality! You can't expect us to just let a third of the settled part of the planet go off and do its own thing!"

"This is supposed to be a Revolution," Cass growled as the elevator doors opened, "not a fucking changing of the guard and more bullshit central rule from Landfall." She stomped into the elevator and punched the button for the ground floor. Carver followed her in.

"Cass, come on, be reasonable," he said. "Look, just…just take five minutes and *breathe,* okay? Then go back in there and hammer out a compromise."

"There's no compromise with statists," she muttered, staring into the corner. Looking Carver in the eye would be more stress than she could cope with right now. "I'm not about to let down my guard and allow a reenactment of the Red Army against Makhno."

"…who the fuck is–"

"Nestor *fucking* Makhno! He was a Ukrainian anarchist and the Bolsheviks betrayed him!" she shouted. "I *know* I've talked about him before!" *Fight back*, the thought came bubbling up again, like it had in the Council meeting. *Fight back. Fight! Back!*

"Okay, okay, calm down," Carver said. "No one wants to betray anyone, Cass, you know that. I mean, hell, I'm a statist by your definition," he added. "Am I not to be trusted?"

"It's not about personal trust. It doesn't *matter* what anyone involved in a state *wants*," Cass hissed. "States are all the same. They're a cancer, they grow and grow and grow and kill anything that tries to stop them growing. They take on a life of their own, they metastasize, and they all eventually turn into the Accord or something like it." The elevator chimed, and she marched out into the lobby of the admin building. "I'm going back to Elysium. At least there, people haven't completely lost track of the entire fucking *point* of what we're doing here!"

"Cass, let me come with you," Carver said as she pushed over the door and stepped out into the hot Landfall summer. The sky was clear, and the slightly-too-white sun was glaring down on blacktop, buildings, and a throng of jubilant former inmates and revolutionaries still celebrating in the streets. Even months after the suits had finally pulled up stakes and abandoned the planet, every afternoon was like this — the minute work was over, the streets were packed, drinks were shared, and the Internationale was in the air.

Cass couldn't help but smile. It was, perhaps, the one undeniably good thing left about the Revolution, seeing how *happy* everyone was. "What are you going to do if you come with me?" she said as she headed for the airfield — still close by to the admin sector, a legacy of O-C's early colonial days. "I'm not going back to convince them, Burt, I'm going back to fucking retire. I'm done playing this stupid statist game."

"You don't mean that," he said. "Come on, Cass, you practically *made* this Revolution happen. What's it going to look like if you just *quit?*"

"Hopefully, an accurate sign that I no longer have faith in the Revolutionary Council to uphold its promises to the people," she said. "If I can't stop this nonsense, maybe the People can." She stopped at the airfield gate and turned to face Carver. He looked tired, but then, she probably did too. They weren't the dumb young twenty-somethings who had been shipped out here two decades back. "Burt, you are my friend, and I respect you. We've been through a lot of shit together. You can't come with me because I need you here. *Please* push this from your end. I don't want this all to fall apart, but I can't let us make the same mistakes all over again. I can't let us overthrow evil only to create our own brand of it."

"You're dead set on this?" he said, that same awkward quirk of his eyebrow that Cass had long ago marked as a clear sign that he was thinking "Stars, why is this woman so fucking *stubborn*?"

"I can only pound my head against a brick wall for so long," Cass said, shrugging.

"Alright, fine," he said, shaking his head, the ghost of a smile turning the corner of his mouth. "You fly safe, okay?"

"And you," she said, stepping in and hugging him, her arms trapping his lest he get any ideas. "Don't you let the bastards grind you down."

"I won't," he said. "Here's hoping, eh?"

"Here's hoping." She let him go, and turned, and never saw him again. Preflight passed like a dream, and soon the little turboprop puddlejumper was in the air and Landfall, the little outbuildings and the tall admin and hab centers, was behind her. She climbed high as the mountains loomed ahead, and the angle of her ascent was the only thing that saved her eyes. Dread filled her heart as the world around her went white, and though she squeezed her eyes shut against it the light still pushed its way in. It was silent, horribly silent for far too long, and when the sound arrived it was like God Himself had torn the sky open like a sheet of paper.

She could feel the puddlejumper's controls rocking angrily in her hands as she fought to maintain control, could see the horizon bleaching under whiter light than she'd ever seen before, could hear the shriek of a dozen alarms filling the cockpit with unholy clamor, the digital voice calmly demanding that she PULL UP, PULL UP, PULL UP. But it was the *heat* that occupied her mind the most, the burning heat crawling into the cockpit, like her arms were on fire. Her arms were on fire, her arms were on fire, her arms were on *fire* and she couldn't move, they'd strapped her down under the machine and gagged her and switch it on and *her arms were on fire*.

“It’s really something, isn’t it?” the clean-shaven man said as he paced around the table, seemingly deaf to Cass’s muted screams. “Same principle as an electromagnetic pulse. You know about those, right?” There was something almost *cheerful* in his voice as he explained the way his horrible machine worked. “A high-energy electromagnetic wave interacts with a length of conductive material, and induces an electrical current — shorts out circuits, *bam*, just like that.” He snapped his fingers for emphasis. “The longer the conductive material, the greater the effect. The Carrington Event in 1859 cooked telegraph wires and even set some telegraph offices on fire! Oh, you’re not listening, are you? Dial it back to zero, let her breathe. Don’t want to stop her heart. Yet.”

The burning stopped instantly, the thrumming of the machine dying back, but the echo of the pain was still there, Cass’s mind fixed on it as she wept and gasped for air. “Did you know that there’s nearly a hundred thousand kilometers of nervous tissue in the human body?” the man went on, leaning over her. She could smell his breath, see the little hairs inside his nose, see the individual threads of his OCNI uniform. “Really, the only trick was finding the *exact* electromagnetic frequency to *only* affect nervous tissue. The whole human body is conductive, you know, and the entire point of this little affair is to not leave a mark on you. No physiological harm beyond that you cause yourself through stress responses. No way around *that* in this business,” he added with a laugh. “Sort of the point of it really. Now, that little tickle you just experienced? That was level one. We have ten defined levels, but really, we can dial it up much higher, though at that point, well, it’d be like a Carrington Event for your nervous system. And we hardly want *that*.” He straightened up, and his voice became hard and cold. “So tell me who else was involved in the Marama incident. Everyone, however tangential their involvement.”

Cass closed her eyes. *I can endure this*, she told herself. *I’m stronger than him, and my cause is just*. She felt herself sliding back into a dark hole in her mind, away from her body, away from the sound of the clean-shaven man’s voice as he said, “No? Alright then, give her level three.” The agony was overwhelming, but it was only a thing of the flesh. *I can endure this*, she told herself. *I won’t betray them*. *I won’t betray her memory. Fight back. Fight back! Fight! Back!*

But everyone breaks eventually. Even in that dark place in her mind, she could feel the tears streaming down her cheeks, could feel the ache deep inside, could feel herself giving up. She hugged herself and wished, wished, wished that she’d never been born, that she didn’t have to be here, that she didn’t have to do this.

“Hey, hey, hey,” a soft, familiar voice said. “Why are you crying?”

She shook her head. Words were beyond her right now. She felt a gentle touch on her knee. “Layla? Breathe with me, okay?” Cass could hear the soft intake of breath, a gentle squeeze on her knee, and she sucked down a gasping breath and tried to hold it. The pressure released, the sound of exhaling, and she let her breath out in a burst. In and out, squeeze and release, until the tears stopped and she could breathe calmly once again. She rubbed at her eyes and opened them.

Her mother was crouching there, next to her, the same vivid green eyes and dark hair just beginning to go grey at the temples. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Cass’s heart ached

— in her mother she could see herself as she was years ago. She was already older than her mother ever got to be. “Why are you crying, dear heart?”

Cass sniffled and shook her head. “I don’t want to go back. I can’t. I’ll study remote, the university allows that, I just–“ She broke off, shaking her head. “I hate it when they stare!”

“Ohhh,” she said, nodding. “I see. Hey, can I sit with you?” Cass nodded, and her mother hunkered down next to her, back against the wall. This represented most of the open floor space in Cass’s room, between the bed and the desk — even on a university salary, their apartment wasn’t exactly luxurious, and this space had never been meant to be a bedroom, but more of a utility closet. Still, it was hers, and it was home, and she loved it. “Layla, my love, who is staring at you?”

“Everyone! Men mostly,” she mumbled, burying her face in her knees. “They can tell, I know they can.”

“I think it’s more that you’re a very pretty girl,” her mother said, smiling and putting an arm around Cass’s shoulders. “I always said so, didn’t I? That your face was far too cute to be hidden under a mustache or a beard or something like that?”

Cass mumbled something noncommittal. She *did* like not having hair on her face anymore. She’d hated that from the moment it first came in.

“You are a lovely girl, and you’re growing up into a lovely woman,” she went on. “And I am so, so proud of you for standing up and saying ‘this is me.’ It tells me you’ve been listening to me all these years,” she added with a laugh. “You will, unfortunately, get this kind of attention from men. It’s wrong, and you shouldn’t feel shy about saying so, but alas, my daughter, my generation has failed to vanquish patriarchy. Maybe yours will. So fight back. *Always* fight back.”

“…okay,” she muttered. It did feel good to hear her mother say that. “Are you and Auntie Ashtî still going to go out to the protest tonight?” There’d been an argument about it earlier, but Cass hadn’t overheard much of it — she’d been too buried in her own frustrations and dysphoria.

“Yes,” she said after a moment’s hesitation. “I know, I know, the curfew announcement. But my love, as you pay more and more attention to the world around you, you’ll find that when power takes steps like these, it means that power is *afraid*. And that’s precisely when we must *never* give in. Wickedness triumphs only when the good-hearted look on and do nothing.”

Cass nodded. It was a frequent refrain from her mother. “I want to come.”

“No, sweetheart,” she said. “You stay here and study. If you go, and you get arrested, you’re going to spend at least a few days in lockup, and then you’d miss your exams. Your father pulled a lot of strings to get you that spot at the university, and you’re going to ace those exams and show everyone that you’re even smarter than he is. And then you’re going to go back in there, and you’re going to rub it right in the noses of all those dogshits who think they can just stare at my little girl. That’s *your* fight for right now, alright?”

Cass leaned into her mother. “Alright. Be safe, okay?”

“Don’t worry,” she said, hugging Cass close. “I will.”

Cass jerked awake, gasping for air, arms and legs flailing. Her eyes ached, her arms ached, *everything* ached…and something was clinging to her torso, holding her down. She let out a wordless cry as she tried to pull herself free, only for the vines around her to tighten. “Shhh, shhh, I’m here, I’m here,” Tsuga whispered, her voice and the thrumming from within her soothing and gentle.

“…Tsuga?” Cass said, her voice catching and stinging. She felt hoarse, like she’d been shouting at the top of her lungs all day long. “Where–“ She looked around the dimly lit forest, her mind spinning as she tried to place it.

“We’re in Polyphylla’s hab,” Tsuga said, “and you’re safe. Nothing will hurt you.” The vines squeezed gently in a full-body hug that nearly broke Cass’s heart, but her eyes were swollen and dry and had no tears left to shed. “You spent several hours in mnemonic regression, and it was…very rough,” she went on. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know how hard it would be on you, or I would never have vouched for it. Your records didn’t point to even half of the things we saw.”

“We… we did it?” Cass said. “But I don’t– I don’t *remember*,” she said, fear clutching at her, cold and sharp. Something *was* there, like a word on the tip of her tongue that she just couldn’t recall.

“Polyphylla put a hypnomnemonic lock on the session. It’s still there, not erased, your mind just knows not to go there. We can lift it later, but for now, she thinks, and I agree, that it’s best for you to leave it alone and simply rest.” One of her vines lifted a bottle of water, opening the top. “Here, drink this.”

Cass took it and pounded half of it at once. “I still feel terrible,” she croaked.

“I’m not surprised,” Tsuga said, scooping Cass up and cuddling her close, her vines still wrapped around her. She was careful, Cass noticed, to keep them as still as possible, and avoided brushing them against her skin, and her arms were entirely bare. *At least one of them can learn*, she thought, leaning into Tsuga’s chest and listening to the soft sounds from within. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“I don’t know,” Cass mumbled. “I feel so… keyed-up. Anxious. And I don’t even know why. I mean, I know *why*, just–“ She sighed and shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Tsuga was silent for a minute, simply holding Cass tightly. “I could, if you want, make you relax.”

“No drugs,” Cass said, shaking her head.

“Not with xenodrugs,” Tsuga said. “I’d simply lightly entrance you again, like I did accidentally before. No digging, no memories, just some gentle relaxation and feelings of

safety. Is that acceptable to you?"

Cass shivered. She'd just *been* hypnotized, and it left her feeling like *this*. But Tsuga said it wouldn't be the same, so… "Maybe?" she said. "Just the trance, nothing else?"

"And some light feelings of safety and comfort," Tsuga said. "To help ease you out of all this tension."

"Are you going to use the Blake quote?" she whispered. Her stomach fluttered, almost as if she was anticipating it, her body ready to plunge back down into the depths again.

"No, I don't want you that deep. It wouldn't work as well without the Class-H xenodrugs in your system, anyway. Here," she said, lifting Cass's chin with her finger and guiding her to look up into her eyes, a warm, striated blue flecked with gold. Cass tried to follow the little flecks around, and immediately got lost in how utterly *immense* her eyes were, how they seemed to fill up the room, how the thrumming from Tsuga grew and grew and grew. "There you go," she said, her voice caressing Cass's mind. "Doesn't that feel better?"

Feel? Cass thought, reaching for the meaning of the word. *Feel*. The way her body felt. The way her heart felt. "…better?" she breathed, unable to look away from Tsuga. She was so *beautiful*, like a work of art that moved, that talked, that held her in its arms. She felt small and delicate next to Tsuga's immensity, against the sheer power of her presence.

"Good girl," Tsuga whispered, and the words rolled through her like a line of distant storm clouds, heavy and numinous with thunder. Distantly, she felt a vine take the water bottle from her hand before she could drop it. "I've got you, right here." The vines tightened around her, compressing her, compacting her down into a tiny, Cass-shaped lump. "Can you feel me all around you?"

Only dimly aware of anything beyond Tsuga, Cass nodded, her half-lidded eyes still locked onto Tsuga's own as they flared brighter and brighter. Somehow, all that light never hurt, no matter how intense it grew — it was comforting, gentle, all-embracing.

"You are here, in my vines," Tsuga whispered. "Are you comfortable?" Cass nodded. If Tsuga said it, it must be true. "And are you safe?" Another nod; Tsuga would never let anything bad happen to her. She'd fought for her so many times, and out of everyone on the ship, Cass knew she could be trusted. She was safe here. "Good girl," she whispered again, leaving Cass a shivering mess, limp in her arms. "Rest now, little petal. You are here, and you are safe." And then, after a moment's hesitation, she added one last statement:

"And you are loved."

Chapter End Notes

> And there we have it, friends — this is the last of the really rough stuff. There will be tears and sadness ahead, for sure, but nothing nearly this rough is coming along. We

have officially made it over the hump and are heading into the wild, free lands of me getting to write all the slow burn finally properly igniting.

Chapter 23: Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

In which nothing else matters but the moment.
Content Warnings: discussion of sophont extinction, biological weapons, and infertility.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tsuga could name a hundred reasons why she shouldn't be trusted with a pet, ranging from reasonable points to self-evidently ridiculous excuses. Ultimately, she did not and had never really trusted herself when it came to matters of import. It was one thing to pick through through the remnants of extinct sophont cultures — they were already dead, and there was little enough harm Tsuga could do to them at that point. Even when it came to climatic engineering and geoscience, individual mistakes rarely spelled disaster, since so many vines handled each problem. But xeno care? Xeno care was something else entirely. There was nothing more important than ensuring the well-being of xenos, and *especially* a xeno under one's direct supervision. There were so many ways it could go wrong, and one had to be on guard for any of them, at any time, *all* the time.

And yet, right now, none of those potential problems could mire Tsuga's core in worry, because set against the sleeping sophont in her lap, her worries were nothing. There was something about seeing Cass's face, carefree and content as she nuzzled into Tsuga, a hand clutching at one of her vines, that outweighed any uneasiness, any concern. For the third time, she thought that if time were to grind to a halt in this moment, this perfect moment with Cass asleep in her arms, she too could feel that content.

One thing did weigh on her mind, though: *And you are loved*. Had she really said that? She had been twisting herself in knots over it for so long, and the ache deep in her core had grown so fierce in that moment that she couldn't stop herself. She had no doubt that what she'd said was true — when it hurt so to keep the secret, how could it not be? — but she worried that it might upset Cass when she woke up. Certainly, it hadn't bothered her while entranced. She might not, Tsuga reminded herself, even remember her saying it. That would probably be for the best. It would let them both go on like they had before, and not risk disrupting what they already had. The last time Tsuga had expressed feelings like these to Cass, she'd gotten so

upset about it. Now, in the wake of such an awful experience, would surely be no different, and very likely worse.

She felt the changes in Cass's breathing, the quickening of her heartbeat, long before the little terran began to stir, to blink her eyes. "Tsuga?" she murmured, squinting against the light streaming into Polyphylla's hab from the false sky. "How long was I out?"

"You slept through the night," Tsuga said, giving Cass a gentle squeeze with the vines wrapped around her. "You clearly needed it, so I let you."

"…haven't slept that well in a long time," she said. After a moment, she added, "Thanks. And sorry I pinned you down here."

"Don't be," Tsuga said, smiling as every one of her needles stood on end. Cass looked so perfect there, in her arms, looking up at her. "It was my pleasure. And I'm glad you slept well. How are you feeling?"

"Better, I think." She stretched, and Tsuga marveled at the whole production. *How can one xeno be this adorable?* she thought. "Though…ugh," she added, wincing and putting a hand to her side. "I really need to go."

"…go where?" Tsuga said. "Polyphylla didn't say anything about–"

"To the bathroom," Cass interrupted. "And I'm a little tied up, so…?"

"Oh. *Oh*. Of course, sorry, let me– here," Tsuga said, slowly working her vines free from around Cass. Part of her recoiled at the thought of letting her go, but she silenced it. *Polyphylla lets Leah wander. I can do the same for a xeno who isn't even my floret*. She set the little terran down on the floor. "Go and get cleaned up. I'll make something for you to eat. I'm sure you're hungry by now."

"Actually, yeah," Cass said, taking a few cautious steps as she walked off her sleep. "That would be great. Thanks."

"I'll get to it, then," Tsuga said, rising and reconsolidating her lower body from the mess of vines she'd used as bedding for Cass as she watched her walk away. She followed, out into the common clearing, where Polyphylla and Leah were cuddled up on the sofa. "Cass is awake," she said as she passed.

"I saw," Polyphylla said, idling stroking Leah's hair. The little terran was drifting in and out, her face pressed lazily into Polyphylla's thigh. "I take it she's mostly recovered?"

"I think so, but you're the expert," Tsuga said. "I'm going to make breakfast for her. Has Leah eaten?"

"She has, but I expect she wants a little snack. Isn't that right, little flower?" she said, tickling Leah and eliciting a giggle from her as she stood up, carrying Leah with her. "I'll come with you. I know cooking is still a new skill for you."

“I know how to do a few things, at least,” Tsuga said. “And I think I will be making Cass a breakfast sandwich.” Sandwiches were easy, not to mention convenient and easily variable; Tsuga had been very impressed by that particular collection of traits.

“Oh, lovely! Well, let me help anyway,” Polyphylla said, running a vine across Tsuga as she followed her into the kitchen. She set Leah on a little round cushion on the stone countertop and added, “Stay.”

“Yes, Mistress!” Leah chirped, curling up and wiggling happily. Small as it was, the cushion was more than spacious enough for her.

“You really don’t need to,” Tsuga said as she dialed an order into the compiler: bread, halal bacon (raw), two eggs, milk, cheese, and a fresh tomato, along with a bit of oil, a bit of soft butter, and a plate for the finished sandwich. It began to rumble away.

“Well, I’m going to be in here making a snack for Leah, anyway,” Polyphylla said, opening the stasis chamber and pulling a small basket of strawberries out. “And I admit I’m curious.”

“Curious about what?” The compiler chimed, and Tsuga pulled out the tray of ingredients, carrying it to the counter beside Polyphylla. “Oh, where do you keep your knives?”

“Up here,” Polyphylla replied, reaching up to the ceiling and taking down a pair of short ceramic knives. <Can’t be too careful with little hands about,> she added in Affini. <And as to what I’m curious about, well, apart from seeing how you’ve mastered the art of the sandwich, which Leah tells me is *critically* important to terran culture, I’m curious as to when you’re going to make your move.>

Tsuga paused as she took one of the knives from Polyphylla. <My move?>

<On Cass,> Polyphylla said, casually cutting up the strawberries while she tapped a few commands of her own into the compiler with a vine. It began to rumble again.

<…there’s no move to make,> Tsuga said. She began slicing the tomato, carefully selecting the exact strata and gauging the thickness to ensure maximum juiciness on the sandwich. <She doesn’t want to be domesticated.>

<And she may not have a choice in the matter,> Polyphylla reminded Tsuga. The compiler chimed, and she retrieved a tray with a small, brilliantly red floral-print bowl. <You were there for her mnemonic regression. Even if her history of violence is complicated and potentially justifiable in the wild, the sheer degree of trauma she’s carrying around, not to mention the instability of her persona…well.> She opened a jar, sprinkled a bit of sugar over the strawberries, and tipped them into the bowl. <I just think it’d be better if she were to approach domestication as an opportunity rather than as some sort of punishment.> “Here you go, sweetling,” she added in English, passing the bowl to Leah. <So make your move.>

“Mmm! Thank you, Mistress!” she said, taking the bowl and beginning to eat the strawberries one by one. Polyphylla gave her a tender stroke, and she let out a happy little noise that not even Tsuga could keep herself from delighting at openly.

<She is unfairly adorable, you know that?> she said. <But there is no move to make. And I'm not a good choice for her, anyway.> More and more, Tsuga had been fighting to cling to that idea as the voice in her head, the voice of desire and of love, demanded action, insisted that she would be a good match for Cass. She cracked her eggs into a bowl and began to whisk them, adding milk slowly.

<You're joking, surely?> Polyphylla said, staring at Tsuga. <I've been observing the two of you together over the last day or so, and it's manifestly obvious that she not only trusts you, but actively wants to be around you. You say you haven't entranced her into it, at least not intentionally, and I believe you, but that just means that she wants it of her own accord.>

<She trusts me because I respect her desires and am honest about my own,> Tsuga replied. With one vine, she sketched out a small square on the countertop, and it began to glow a dull infrared as it heated up. <If I ask her to be my pet, I lose that. I've already had one close call on that score, and I don't mean to make the mistake again.>

"… is Cassie okay?" Leah said, pouting, a strawberry held in her sugar-dusted fingers halfway from bowl to mouth.

"Of course, petal," Polyphylla said, giving her a gentle scritching behind her ear. "Why wouldn't she be?"

Leah let out a happy sigh at the touch, but the concern was still there in her face and voice. "Well, she had to have desk time, and I know when I have to have desk time it means something broke in me. And you're talking about her now but you're doing it in Affini so you probably don't want me to hear. I don't really know *what* you're saying, but, uhm…I know *enough* Affini to know you're talking about Cassie."

"Oh my little flower," Polyphylla said, smiling. "We are, yes, but we're talking in Affini because we didn't want you to worry unnecessarily, alright? You just have your snack. I promise, my love, I *promise* that we're going to take care of Cass, and she's going to be alright. Okay?" With a delicate touch of a vine, she steered the strawberry towards Leah's mouth; with another, she gave her a gentle tap on her cheek, and Leah's mouth opened just in time. Another tap under her chin, and she took the treat.

"Okay, Mistress," she said when she swallowed. "Thank you."

<You have a very smart, *very* good girl,> Tsuga said, keeping her Affini slow and precise. Leah giggled and kicked her feet a bit, just as Tsuga had expected. *Good girl*, and appropriate variations thereupon, were often some of the first words xenos picked up in Affini. She poured a bit of oil onto the cooktop. "Oh. Spatula?"

"Here," Polyphylla said, reaching up and extracting a long, thin tool from above and handing it over. <She *is* a very good girl,> she added, the pride a vibrato in her biorhythm as well as her voice. <And Cass would be too, with very little effort on your part, I think.>

<I'm sure she would be,> Tsuga said as she poured the eggs out onto the glowing cooktop, and they began to set almost immediately. She scraped the eggs back and forth to ensure they didn't burn.

<And I can tell that you want it,> Polyphylla went on, coiling a few vines around her. <Your biorhythms are practically saturated with the need for it.>

<We often want things we can't have,> Tsuga said as she levered a sheet of fluffy scrambled eggs off to the side. With a single slide of a vine next to the cooktop, it began to glow brilliantly as it became searing hot. Tsuga laid out the halal bacon on it, and it began to spit and crackle as it cooked.

<But you *can*,> Polyphylla insisted. <What do you have to gain from denying yourself?>

Her happiness, Tsuga thought as she flipped the bacon, but she caught herself almost immediately. Cass *wasn't* happy — the mnemonic regression more than proved that. The poor creature was carrying so much trauma Tsuga was amazed she was as functional as she was. But that's what Cass was: *functional*. Not happy. <I envy your confidence,> she said at last as she buttered the slices of bread and began to construct the sandwich. <I'm sure you'd have solved this problem already.>

<I think the solution to your problem is closer than you think,> Polyphylla said, leaning into Tsuga. <You just have to recognize it for what it is.>

<Perhaps.> She scooped the bacon off the cooktop, laid it gently atop the sandwich, and finished it with the second slice of bread. Then, she levered the completed sandwich back onto the heated surface, dialing the heat back down, to let it toast and brown. This was a very important part of the breakfast sandwich, she'd read — a good *crunch*. After a moment, she slid the spatula beneath it and flipped it to toast the other side. The bottom, now the top, was a glorious golden-brown. *All that practice is paying off*, Tsuga thought, very pleased with her effort.

It had been a good sandwich, and it had followed a nice, private bath during which no Affini had pestered her to make sure she was cleaning herself properly, and *that* had followed the best night of sleep Cass had experienced for quite some time. There was some disquiet about how she'd *gotten* that sleep — letting Tsuga play with her mind like that scared the hell out of her, but given how anxious Tsuga was about herself, Cass didn't think it was likely she'd broken her promise. She certainly didn't *feel* any different.

There were bad things too, of course. There were *always* bad things, one way or another. In this case, it was the dredged up memories slowly starting to leak around the block Polyphylla had put in, as she'd explained would happen over breakfast and during the walk over to Pisca's hab. According to her, it would be a slow and easy reacquaintance with what had happened in the session. Even without it, though, Cass's mind was at least in part mired in her past, since she knew full well what had happened to her throughout her life and could readily guess where a (probably well-meaning) busybody like Polyphylla would go poking even if she wasn't starting to remember the details. And then there was what Tsuga had said, but she was trying very hard not to think about that.

None of it mattered right now, anyway. Everything on her mind was being pushed aside by Aletheia bullying her way into Cass's lap, whimpering and rubbing herself up against her like a cat or some other animal demanding affection. This was not the first time it had happened

since the visit at Pisca's hab began, and it would probably not be the last — Aletheia was, as Polyphylla had explained it, having her xenodrug dosage ramped up in preparation for implant surgery, which left her in a state where any thoughts that might chance to enter her head were so fleeting that she certainly wouldn't be voicing them. She was operating purely on instinct and impulse at the moment, and unfortunately for Cass those impulses still included Aletheia's inexplicable attraction to her.

"Allie, no!" Leah said, laughing and hugging Aletheia from behind and tugging her away from Cass. The redhead made a soft bleat of protest before forgetting entirely what she'd been doing and burying her face between Leah's breasts. "Mmm, good girl, Allie!" Leah said, stroking Aletheia's hair with one hand and cuddling her up close with the other. "I can't believe *I* get to say that," she added, winking at Cass.

"Thanks," Cass mumbled, thankful that Leah had, once she'd realized Cass was uncomfortable with affection from Aletheia in her present state, taken on the task of occupying Aletheia's attentions as much as she could. Not that Cass was comfortable with Aletheia's affections when she was sober, either, but seeing her like this was having the exact opposite effect on her as it seemed to be having on Leah, or on the Affini for that matter, who seemed to regard Aletheia's current behavior as "irresistibly cute." Even Tsuga had gotten in on the routine, petting and stroking Aletheia in ways Cass found hard to watch.

And you are loved. What the hell was that supposed to mean?! Cass had been stewing over it practically since she'd woken up, unable to put it completely out of her mind. *She'd better not be getting back on her domestication feelings*, Cass thought, *or I'm screwed. She's the only one I have backing me up*.

"Oh, I don't mind," Leah said, totally oblivious to Cass's internal quandary. "I remember when I had to get ramped up for *my* implant. Sort of." She screwed up her face, pursing her lips as she pushed to remember. "Mmm. Yeah. I remember it. It was fun! Allie's having a great time."

"Mnuh?" Aletheia lifted her head, a dopey, confused expression on her face.

"Oh, you heard your name, huh?" Leah said. "Stars, I *totally* get why Mistresss likes t–" She squeaked as she was cut off by Aletheia pressing her lips against Leah's. One of them giggled — maybe Leah, maybe Aletheia — and they both rolled over and began to make out. *Again*. Cass couldn't help but see a future version of herself in the same position, thoughtless and empty-headed, cavorting on the floor like an animal. *That's what they want for me*, she thought. *They'll do it to me in a heartbeat if they decide I need it, and there's nothing I can do to stop it. I need to get out of here. I need to think. I need to think of a way out.*

She got to her feet and walked off, past the trio of Affini sitting around a low table. Pisca's hab was a lot like Tsuga's, in that she'd filled it with many of the same kinds of vegetation in many of the same configurations, as if she was trying out the style as she looked for her own. "I need some air. I'm going outside," she said, neither stopping nor looking up at them. She didn't want to give them a chance to argue it.

"Well, alright," Polyphylla said, "but don't wander off!"

Cass bit her tongue and said nothing as she stalked through the entryway. “See you soon, cutie!” the hab chimed as the door slid open, one last jab before she was blessedly free and into the mossy, rocky garden out in front of Pisca’s hab. She chose a relatively smooth one to sit upon, buried her face in her hands, and tried as hard as she could not to cry.

It went about as well as everything else she’d ever done.

I fucked up. I fucked up. I fucked up. The words echoed in her head as she lost herself in sorrow and regret. It wasn’t just about the mnemonic regression, or her fundamental misread of the Affini, or even agreeing to come up to the ship in the first place; it was *everything*, everything she’d ever done, every choice she’d ever made. Everything she had ever touched was irretrievably fucked, and it was all her fault. Her only consolation was that, when the Affini finally got around to deciding to scramble her brain, there wouldn’t be enough left of her to feel bad about it — she’d be like Leah, like Aletheia too now, blissfully sleepwalking through the rest of her days.

Sure, there were florets who were functional, even *normal*, if you discounted their totally blasé attitude towards being property, but Cass was never going to be a floret like *that*. Even Cliff, who had charged an Affini with a grenade in his hand, was just a schlub who’d been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He’d been conscripted, hadn’t had a choice in where he was or what he was doing. He hadn’t started the war. He hadn’t been in command. He hadn’t gotten half the population of Solstice killed in a single day.

She was so lost in her tears that she didn’t hear the soft creaking of wood, the gentle susurration of vine on vine, and the ever-present infrasonic rumble until Tsuga was already crouching down next to her. She didn’t reach out to touch Cass, didn’t so much as prod her with a vine, but simply sat there, close but not *too* close, until Cass finally mastered herself enough to cast a glance up at her.

“I thought you might like some company,” Tsuga said, her voice soft, soothing. It reminded Cass of the previous night, the comfort and safety she’d felt listening to it. “But if you’d like me to go, I will.”

“Stay,” Cass managed to croak out, the only word she managed to say before she dissolved into tears again. *And here you are, crying in front of her again*. *She’s going to think this is all you are if you keep this up. Stop fucking crying, you coward!*

“I will,” Tsuga said, edging slightly closer to Cass. “I’m right here, and I won’t go anywhere unless you ask me to.” Another soft creak came as she lifted a hand, holding it just behind Cass. “May I?” Cass nodded, and she felt the heavy weight descend on her back, a still and comforting pressure.

Cass sobbed helplessly. *Look at you. You’re practically letting her pet you like a fucking animal! How are you any different from Aletheia like this? Fight back! Fight! Back!* There was no escaping it, no getting away from how much every single decision she made was a colossal fuck-up from square one. Even now, she was failing, and this massive alien plant was going to make a mindless pet out of her.

“Is this about the mnemonic regression? Has the block fully broken down?” Cass shook her head, and Tsuga let out a rumbling sound that Cass felt throughout her body like a brief massage. “Then…I’m sorry, but I don’t know what’s hurting you. But I’ll listen, if you want to talk.”

“Just…*everything*,” Cass managed to whimper, sniffling and wiping at her eyes, her nose. “Everything is *fucked*.”

“I don’t think it’s as bad as you think,” Tsuga said. She offered a vine to Cass, and she reached out and took it, squeezing it tightly. It was soft, and gave gently under pressure.

“Everything I’ve ever done… a fucking *mistake*,” she whispered. “Everything *wrong*. Useless. Fucked.”

“Not true,” Tsuga insisted. “You kept your comrades alive through a terrible disaster.”

“After I got tens of thousands more of them killed!” Cass spat.

“That wasn’t your doing. That was a decision made by someone else, far away, executed by others, none of whom you’ve ever met.”

“I started the fucking revolution, Tsuga!” Cass shouted, anger the only thing that had so far that was holding off the tears. *Good. Use it! Fight back! Fight harder!* “I helped organize it, I was central fucking logistics for the early days, I disseminated educational materials through Archives orders, I made it *fucking happen!*”

“And others joined you of their own free will,” Tsuga replied, her voice even, calm, soothing, welcoming, unmoving — Cass’s anger dashed upon it like waves on a breakwater. “And having seen some of the conditions they, and you, were kept in on Solstice, I can easily see why.”

This was wrong. She wasn’t supposed to be *understanding*, she was supposed to see why Cass was a monster, a fuck-up, a mistake without any redeeming value. “I… I took advantage of them! I got them killed! I probably got Auntie Ashtî killed, I never heard from her after the Marama Complex, and she sure never showed up on Solstice! I abandoned my father, I ruined *everything*, and it all meant *nothing!*”

“You did no such thing,” Tsuga said. Another vine snaked in, gently steering Cass’s head by the chin to make her face Tsuga. “You did no such thing,” she repeated.

“I… I let my mother die,” she whispered, the fire going out of her. Anger could no longer hold back the floodwaters that drowned her heart. The tears returned, but she was too tired, too *empty*, to sob any longer.

“No,” Tsuga said. “Her death was a tragedy, one I am very sorry you had to endure, but it was not a tragedy of your making. If you had gone with her, you might have suffered the same fate — and then I would never have gotten to meet you, to say nothing of all the other people whose lives you’ve touched since then. Have you failed to notice how you inspire others? How they care for you?”

And you are loved. There it was, in the back of her mind again. She shook her head. "Everything I did was wrong," she breathed.

"No," Tsuga said. She extended her other hand, holding it out to Cass. "May I hug you? You look as though you could use a hug." Cass sniffled and nodded, and Tsuga's fingers closed firmly but delicately around her as she was lifted into the air, pressed into Tsuga's chest. Her thick, sharp scent pushed past sinuses clogged with tears, and the warm pressure of her bore down on Cass's sorrow. "Shhhh," Tsuga whispered, the sound of it penetrating every cell of Cass's body. "I'm here."

And Cass wept, though she felt as though there were no more tears in her. She wept, and wept, until the world fell away and there was only her and Tsuga, a presence so powerful but so gentle that she couldn't help but allow it into her, allow it to pass through her, and as it did she felt the tension in her body slacken, felt the rage and the grief begin to wash away. "Thank you," she finally whispered, her face still buried against what would be Tsuga's collarbone, if she had bones.

"Of course," Tsuga replied. "I will always be here for you, whenever you need me, no matter what happens."

"It doesn't matter," Cass mumbled. "None of it matters. Nothing I've ever done mattered. It was all pointless."

"I very much disagree," Tsuga said, "but why do you say that?"

"Because *you* exist," Cass said, the hurt amplifying her voice more than she meant to. "Because if I'd just sat at home and been a good little cog in the machine that killed my mother, you'd have come along and fixed everything anyway!" The sobs began to gather in her chest again, threatening to take back lost territory. "Nothing I've ever done has changed *anything*. It's just made me and a lot of other people miserable, and gotten so many people killed, and all for *nothing*."

"You did what you felt was right at the time," Tsuga said, giving Cass a gentle squeeze. "I'm not going to judge you for things you did in the wild. You didn't know we were coming, you couldn't have. You believed you had to take matters into your own hands, and given what you experienced, that's very understandable. The important thing is that you're safe now, and you'll be taken care of."

"After what you saw? After everything I've *done*?" Cass sucked in a long, sniffly breath. "I'm fucked, Tsuga."

"Polyphylla is still laying out your psyche map. She hasn't even written her report yet, and we don't know how the committee will vote even in light of that. I think you have a very good chance of remaining independent. So please don't despair. Your situation may seem bleak from where you're standing, but I promise you, no matter what happens, you will be okay."

"You don't understand," Cass whispered. "You just don't understand. You *can't*. You've never been powerless like this before." Tsuga went dead silent — even her biorhythms died

back hard, after a brief burst of dissonance — and still as a rock. *Oh, great*, Cass thought. *I fucked up even more.* "H-hey, I'm sorry," she added, "I don't know what I–"

"No, it's okay," Tsuga interrupted, her body softening again as her internal rhythms restored themselves. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you."

"But I *did* fuck up," Cass said. "I know I did, you can't convince me I didn't." She felt Tsuga shift internally. "Please," she said. "Tell me what I did wrong, so I can stop fucking up in at least *one* way, okay?"

Tsuga hesitated. "I suppose I've seen a great deal of your trauma," she finally said. "Perhaps it would help to share a little of mine. Do you remember when we discussed gender?"

Cass chuckled, despite herself. "Yeah, I had to explain what a dyke is to you."

"And I told you about a particular species I had encountered before, the– well, I've noticed you flinch when I say their name. I suppose it's uncomfortable for you?"

"A bit, yeah," Cass said. "Sorry, it just… sounds like metal scraping on metal. It's not a sound our ears like."

"I'll refrain from speaking their language, then," she said, sighing. "Though it really is beautifully poetic. In any case…I met them while conducting an archaeological survey. We thought the planet was dead, there were no signs of life, so we went about our work for several years of cataloguing and reconstructing their civilization, looking for remains we might be able to salvage hereditary information from, and so on. And then I happened to discover a small group of survivors who were living in a bunker nearly a kilometer below the surface."

"Oh, God…" Cass suddenly understood the obsession with fragility, the anxiety that Tsuga must have felt in that moment. "But you saved them, right?"

"…no," Tsuga said, staring off into the distance. "We tried, but…they had used a teratogenic biological weapon at some point in their past, before their biosphere collapsed. It's part of why the biosphere *did* collapse. It took up residence in their hereditary molecules and stayed there, causing persistent damage even in the descendants of survivors. We found 81 in that nest, all very ill, and we found no other surviving nests despite an exhaustive search once we realized there might be others. Within three years the population was down to the low 40s, despite one of the most massive mobilizations of medical specialists the Compact has ever seen. Hundreds of ships, millions of Affini. Perhaps tens of millions. I stayed because, as the one who found them, they saw me as a sort of savior figure. It gave them a great deal of comfort to know that, even if I wasn't a medical specialist, I was still there, watching out for them."

Cass tried to imagine it — millions of Affini descending on a world in the name of saving less than a hundred lives. Millions of Affini working towards the same end, and somehow *not* succeeding, despite all their power and technology. "How?" she blurted out. "I mean…you couldn't figure out what was wrong?"

“No, we knew the problem,” Tsuga said. “But their hereditary molecule was so complex and so flexible that any changes we attempted to introduce proved even more disastrous than the teratogenic weapon they employed in the first place. The problem was compounded by their eusociality, since they only had a single surviving queen.” She went still again for a long moment. “I’m sorry. I don’t talk about…well, queen is a feminine term in your language, and she did produce eggs, so I suppose I should say that I don’t talk about *her* often.”

“You don’t have to,” Cass said softly, reaching up with one hand to touch Tsuga’s chin. “You really don’t.”

“For the first time in a long while,” Tsuga said, turning her head to give Cass a weak smile, “I think I want to.”

“What was her name?”

“In Standard English, it would probably take me about five minutes to give you an accurate translation,” Tsuga said. “I told you, highly poetic language. I’ll just give you an abbreviated version of the initial thesis statement of her name: Mother in Ashes, Strong of Limb and Quick of Mind, Vast in Her Glory, Whose Children Will Outnumber the Stars. They had a lot of hope bound up in her, you see, which I think must have been very hard for her, considering she couldn’t lay fertile eggs.”

Cass felt a deep, remorseless cold run across her skin. Her troubles, her guilt, suddenly seemed so infinitesimal by comparison. Her cheeks flushed in shame at how *petty* her life was compared to that kind of weight, that kind of guilt. “Fuck,” she whispered, unable to articulate anything more.

“We tried to fix that, of course. We never could, at least, not while she was still alive. And she was the youngest among them, so she outlived the rest by a considerable margin. Twelve years.” Tsuga squeezed Cass tight, tight enough that for a fleeting moment it was uncomfortable before her chest gave way and softened, becoming another part of the embrace as it half-swallowed Cass. Even if Cass had wanted to resist, there was no way she could have. Tsuga was simply too strong. “She was so very lonely. I worry that, in the last days before her death, she was sure that she would be the last of her species. I’m very happy to say she was not — we were able to resurrect them about fifteen years later, and while her children may not outnumber the stars, there are billions upon billions of them, living on a world that is green and healthy again, and they are all very, very happy. But I’ve never been able to forget the way her pedipalps trembled when she talked about it. I do wish she had been able to live to see it, to know for certain that she wasn’t the end of it all.”

“I’m sorry,” Cass whispered, her mouth half buried in Tsuga’s vines. “That’s…*fuck*.”

“You should have seen my Sixth Bloom,” she said, her rueful laugh a wave that rolled around Cass. “If my colleagues think me neurotic now, they should talk to my friends back in Andromeda. I was scarcely functional. I don’t know why anyone let me be in charge of anything, much less ecological engineering.” Her chest slowly released Cass, and she fell gently back into Tsuga’s arms. “You’ve actually been very helpful, you know, in helping me to… to find a place of stability, I suppose is the best way to phrase it. Even very recently, just thinking about this could render me useless for days.”

“What, because you want to make me your pet?” Cass said, half joking — she knew full well that Tsuga still wanted that. *And you are loved* still echoed in the back of her head.

“…I do want that,” Tsuga said. “I want to be strong for you, so I can help you overcome your own hurt. And I want to make you happy, happier than you’ve ever been, and to do that every single day of your life. I want every day from now on to be the best day of your life, Cass. I want so, so badly to give that to you.” She hesitated for a moment, then gently set Cass down on the ground; Cass’s legs almost gave way, and when Tsuga released her she felt cold for a moment even though the ship’s ambient temperature was quite comfortable. “But I also know that it’s not what you want for yourself,” she went on. “I know that you want to remain independent, and even if I think it would probably be better for you to be domesticated, I think you are functional enough to live on your own, so I will respect that.”

Cass stared up at Tsuga, her heart pounding in her chest. *God, I can’t believe she can just* say *these things out loud like it’s nothing*, she thought. She was so honest and forthright and kind and gentle when she said it. It was impossible not to take her at her word — Tsuga believed she could do those things, she very likely could, and she genuinely wanted nothing more than to do them. And yet, despite that, she was willing to stand back, to let Cass stand on her own. “Thank you,” she whispered, unable to make her voice any louder.

Tsuga smiled, her eyes a complex swirl of colors that Cass had to fight to drag her gaze away from. Even crouching down, she was absolutely immense, seeming to fill the world up. “There is one thing I would like to ask you,” Tsuga said. “I was going to wait, but if you’re this concerned about things, perhaps now would be a better time to bring it up. If the committee *does* decide you’re to be domesticated…there’s paperwork I can file ahead of time that would place me at the front of the line. Would having that in place be a comfort to you? To know that I’d be the one to take care of you?”

“I…what?” Somehow, Cass’s heart sped up, cold sweat beading at the back of her neck. “You… you’re serious?! I thought you didn’t want to– didn’t trust yourself to–” She stumbled over her words, unable to properly articulate what she was trying to say. *And you are loved*. How was she supposed to think with that in her head all the time?

“Just in case, so that you’d know who it would be. I promise that I’d make the minimum necessary changes to help you. I don’t *want* to change who you are. I just want to let you be yourself in a way that doesn’t hurt. And again, this is *only* if the committee votes to have you domesticated.”

“I don’t– Tsuga, I can’t– That’s the next best thing to just *volunteering* for it!” Cass protested.

“It’s only a contingency,” Tsuga reassured her. “It carries no more weight than that, I promise, and it certainly won’t predispose the committee to recommend you for domestication. I just want to help you feel a little safer, that’s all.”

“Tsuga, I can’t answer that,” Cass said, hugging herself and looking down at the mossy ground cover. “Not…not right now.” *How could I ever?* How was she supposed to know how to feel about this? How was one supposed to feel about a giant alien tree woman who wanted to put a collar on you and feed you and treat you like an animal? How did that even enter into the calculus of a human mind?

“Then I’ll wait,” Tsuga said, holding one hand out to Cass. “I will follow your lead on this, however you want to address it.”

“But you want it,” Cass whispered, glancing up at Tsuga’s hand. Part of her wanted to take it, if only for the comfort of a familiar, safe touch. It was so rare she could find that, and now that she had, her skin was as hungry for touch as it was afraid of it.

“Yes,” Tsuga admitted. “I do. Because you are a wonderful little sophont, and you have helped me in so many ways already, and I very much wish to return the favor — whether or not that ends with you as my floret. So I will follow your lead. I promise.”

Cass took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. *She’s the only one that’s even a little on your side. Don’t push her away now. She’s your only way out of this with your mind intact.* “Okay,” she whispered, reaching out with one hand to take Tsuga’s. It dwarfed hers in a way that was as comical as it was comforting. “File it. But this doesn’t mean I want domestication. It doesn’t mean you get to treat me like a floret in the meantime. It doesn’t mean I’m *going* to be your floret. It’s just a safety net.”

“Just a safety net,” Tsuga said, smiling and giving Cass’s hand a gentle squeeze. “Nothing more.”

Chapter End Notes

Work stuff picking back up at the worst possible time, but that's freelancing for you. Here's hoping you're all doing well and having as good a winter as you can!

Chapter 24: Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

In which plans are made.
Content Warnings: Allusion to sex, bondage, and Nikolai being Nikolai.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The mine had one thing going for it, Nikolai thought — it wasn't nearly as cold as the fucking surface. The entire way here, he'd shivered in the back of the truck, all the rejects from Overlook staring at him the entire time, like they thought *he* was the wormhead plantfucker that was going to backstab them all. His gut still churned over it even now, days after they'd made it to the old salt mine. They weren't alone there, with people coming from settlements all over the valley, from as far as Woolman and even Haviland. No surprise, communists the lot; even before the revolt Elysium was a shit job they gave to fuck-ups or people who pissed off their superiors due to the high rate of prisoner infractions.

The company had never bothered with the mine — they weren't trying to live some kind of agrarian fucking lifestyle — so of course the communists had been using it as a base during the revolt. Half of it had collapsed in the quakes caused by the orbital strike, so it was a shelter of last resort — but that was exactly the kind of situation they were in. Anyone even vaguely able to do so was being pulled into work shoring the supports up in the livable section of the mine, and Nikolai was no exception. At least the work kept him warm, and they'd given him a respirator so he wasn't sucking down salt dust every time someone had to drive a piton or something. Most of what he was doing was lugging lumber for nerdy communists who stood around arguing over where a support should go. If nothing else, it gave him time to think.

Fucking plants, he thought as he set down a beam and shuffled off back down the tunnel, almost whacking his head on a hanging light bulb. The more he thought about it, the more obvious it became: the weeds had gotten to Nell. Why else would she have tried to get rid of him like this, to sideline him where he couldn't get anything done? They'd fought before, and she'd never actually pulled anything like this. It had to be the weeds, using her to fuck up their command structure.

The only other officer he knew for certain had gotten out of Twin Creeks was Trish — yet more evidence of weed sabotage, Nikolai now realized, they never should have been caught there — and Trish had always been useless anyway. A little medic training, and she thought that qualified her to be in charge. At least she probably wasn't a wormhead, but she wasn't doing anyone any favors. With Nell compromised, that left it to Nikolai to turn this clusterfuck around. How he was going to *do* that, he wasn't sure yet, but no one else in this den of useless fucking convicts was going to pull it out. It was him or a worm in your brains — sooner or later, even these dipshits had to see that. They'd fall in line.

Yeah, he thought as he sat down on a crate in what passed for a refectory, the hum of air filters all around. He'd take a minute to rest, then down some of the weak-ass gruel they were serving up from a pot in the corner, and then it'd be full-steam ahead on taking back Solstice. No more stupid shitty wood-lugging time-wasting. He had *real* work to do.

"Waltz?" Nikolai looked up to see a skinny guy in coveralls, dark hair caked in dust, respirator still strapped to his face. He was familiar, somehow. "Is that seriously you?" he said, pulling the respirator down around his neck, revealing his long, equally skinny face.

"…Keeler?" Nikolai stared up at him, suddenly cold like he'd walked out onto the surface unprotected. "No fucking way, I thought you were dead!" He was on his feet and wrapping his fellow guard in a massive bear hug, followed by heavy slaps on his back — if a hug didn't hurt at least a little, it was suspect.

"Nah, man! They shipped me out here two days before it happened," he said, laughing and smacking Niko's back in turn. The bastard might have been skinny, but he still had some punch in him. "Nice beard, guy, I almost didn't recognize you."

"Eh, beats shaving with freezing fucking water," Nikolai said, scratching at it. That, he thought, and the fact that it looked pretty badass. "Never thought *you'd* go for work release, but I'm damn glad you did."

"Hey, same, bud," Keeler said, sitting down on a crate next to Nikolai's. "Never took you for the sort to go along with a revolt."

"Well, I had a plan," he added in a low voice, sitting back down himself and grinning. "See, I had an in with a convict who it turned out was up to her fucking hips in that shit. I knew she was a fucking commie, I mean she never shuts up about it, but I figured, hey, I play along, I keep my ears open, and when the company finally decides to come back, oh look, I have a whole bunch of intel to hand them. That's initiative, friend. That's the kind of shit that gets you promoted."

"Smart," he admitted. "Didn't work out, obviously. Fucking plants from space, can you believe it? I always thought that was some kind of joke the suits were pulling on us."

"I've seen 'em, they're real," Nikolai said, suppressing a shudder. "Fucking huge, bulletproof, creepy as shit, and they get inside your head. The worm thing is *real*."

"No shit?" Keeler said, leaning forward. "Fuckin' mind control worms?"

“Yeah. I don’t think the scar thing is real, though, or if it was, they’ve gotten better at hiding it, because I’m pretty sure we’ve got wormheads down here sabotaging us, same as they sabotaged the Cosmic Navy. You’ve heard, right?”

“About the weeds beating the Navy in three years?” He snorted. “Man, you don’t buy that, do you? Brain got soft from your ‘in’ with communists?”

“I dunno,” Nikolai said. “I mean, Nell said they’ve got a fuckin’ nine-klick ship up there.”

“Smoke and mirrors, man, psy ops shit,” Keeler insisted. “We’re in the ass end of nowhere, you think they’d come here *after* Terra? We’re what they’d lock down first, make us some kind of logistics station or some shit for the push inward. You think the Accord would fall in three years? We’re still in the initial stages, here. Like, sure, I’ve seen their ships over the valley, weird fuckin’ shit, I bet the fighting is *real* intense, a fuckin’ meatgrinder even, but total defeat? Not possible.”

Nikolai considered it. The weeds *did* have a lot of high-tech shit, but Keeler had a point, and before he’d washed out of Basic on a bum knee he’d been focusing on officer training materials, or so he’d said years back. He knew more about actual military practice. “You think the fight’s still going on?”

“Come on, you think Terrans are just gonna roll over and die like that? Real Terrans,” he added, “not these communists and convicts. Look, I get it, surrounded by this kind of scum, I absolutely get why you’d buy it. You said it yourself, man, they get in your head — it’s all psy ops shit.”

“Damn,” Nikolai thought. He’d actually fallen for it. Shame crawled its way, hot and stinging, up the back of his neck. “Fuckin’ insidious.”

“Hey, like I said, I don’t blame you, bud,” Keeler said, patting Nikolai on the shoulder just shy of aggressively. A little cloud of dust rose up from his glove. “What matters is you get to the right understanding in the end.”

“Yeah.” Nikolaid did his best to seize the shame and redirect it in a more productive direction. Shame didn’t get anything done, but anger sure as fuck did. “I had an idea,” he muttered, leaning in closed, “but it’s not something I can pull off myself. We have any more guys here, or is it just us?”

“Well, that’s the thing about shelters of last resort,” Keeler said, grinning. “All us guards they tried to keep separated all crammed into the same mine with everyone else. I know for a fact we’ve got Harriman, McCloskey — you remember McCloskey, right? — and I think I saw Luscombe the other day.”

“Good,” Nikolai said. “Because think about it — they’re plants, right? And what do we have a shit-ton of, lying around unused ever since the big freeze? Industrial motherfucking *herbicide*.”

“Ohhh, I like the way you think, brother,” Keeler said, nodding approvingly.

“Damn right,” he said. No wonder Nell had tried to shut down the idea, if she’d been compromised. “We dig that shit up out of whatever warehouse it’s in, we lay a trap for these things, and when they show up, we hose ’em down and rip off their ship. Those things have to be armed, I mean, ships that size, in a war zone?”

“Figures,” Keeler said. “Even transports have some armaments.”

“And they won’t expect one of their own ships, will they? So we fly it up there and hull the mothership, just vent it right to vacuum. Weeds aren’t gonna like that any more than we would! *Then*, we get us some vacsuits, take the ship for ourselves–“

“And go to join the fight!” Keeler said, grinning. “Shit, man, they’d have to *invent* new medals to give us if we can pull that off.”

“You read my mind,” Nikolai said, pounding one fist into another. “So let’s sound out some of our guys — real quiet like, we don’t know how many wormheads we’ve got here — and then let’s figure out where some of that shit is cached and work up a plan. And *then*,” he added, chuckling, “we get us some weedkiller, and we kill us some weeds.”

The stars stared silently down, and the butterflies had all fluttered away to their softly glowing nests in the trees. The gentle tumbling of the mirrorfall was the only sound, a soft white noise that, more than once, had easily lulled Cass to sleep — and yet tonight, she sat awake, staring into the dark spaces between the trees, dreading the artificial dawn that was to come.

It was the inevitable end of the road she’d been on for weeks now, an end never far from her mind but which had nevertheless slipped from immediate consciousness. Polyphylla had completed her psyche map, and a meeting had been scheduled for her to present her findings and, potentially, end the wardship, one way or another. Come this time tomorrow, she would likely know if she was to remain free, to keep her own mind and thoughts and will, or have a piece of an alien surgically implanted in her spine to remake her in what they considered a more fitting image.

Leah stirred in her arms, soft and sweet-swelling, yawning and blinking up at her. “Can’t sleep?” Her voice was a soft murmur, almost lost in the trickle of the mirrorfall.

“Yeah,” Cass said, stroking Leah’s hair. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

She shook her head. “Do you want me to call Mistress for some Class-Z?”

“No.” The last thing Cass wanted was unconsciousness. She couldn’t shake the dread that any thought she had, any choice she made, might be the last one she ever made as herself. It was irrational, but the oblivion of sleep felt an awful lot like wasted opportunities to her in the moment. “I’m used to missing sleep, anyway.”

“Well…” Leah met Cass’s eyes for just a moment, then leaned in for a kiss, which Cass accepted gratefully. There was something marvelously comforting in Leah’s wholehearted love, and in her love for Leah in turn. Cass wasn’t sure when it had happened, but at some

point this sweet, beautiful woman had wormed her way into her heavily-guarded heart, and she couldn't deny it. Had it been when she'd seen how much work had gone into making her the way she was, and how much she had really needed it? Had it been that first time they'd made love, frantic and eager and confused and wanting it all the same? Had it been the lunch they'd shared at Cliff's, or the first time they'd met at the grocery? Cass couldn't untangle it all — it was all part of the same journey, each moment inextricable from the rest.

She lingered in the kiss for a long moment, then slowly ran one hand up the curve of Leah's thigh, slipping under her nightdress and earning a shiver and a moan of delight. With her other hand, she cupped Leah's cheek and gently broke the kiss. "No matter what happens," she whispered, her eyes meeting Leah's, the power of them almost overwhelming for all they were those same, gentle, unconcerned eyes she always had, "we'll always have this."

"Yeah," she whispered back, her smile as pure and sweet as her heart. "I don't plan on letting go of you aaaanytime soon~." She leaned in and kissed Cass again, and the two fell back into the easy, comforting rhythm of lovemaking.

Sleep, when it came, did so without much effort.

"…leading me to conclude that the subject is entirely honest when she professes her intention not to engage in violence." The diagram on the wall behind Polyphylla, for all that she'd explained it point by point, was still dizzyingly complex and inscrutable as far as Cass was concerned, but all the Affini present seemed to be following along. They, of course, weren't nearly so distracted by what the Captain was doing.

"Even though she's engaged in rather a lot of violence before?" Andoa said, running eir vines across Nell's hair. At the far end of the table, she was half-embedded in the Captain, vines wrapped so tightly around her that all her struggles could barely produce a wriggle, a thick gag of knotted vines muffling her cries. Cass had very nearly seen red when she'd walked into the big, oval-shaped meeting room and seen Nell like that, but she'd managed to keep herself under control, forced a long moment of eye contact with Nell, and sat in the little elevated chair they'd provided for her, so that she could see above the glossy, glass-like surface of the table. At least it was comfortable.

"Oh, she's willing to employ violence," Polyphylla responded, "but only in tightly controlled ways — that's obvious both from Neoxenoveterinary Archaeobureaucracy's evidence as well as the psyche map. She actually displays a profound revulsion to violence in every instance, if you can believe it. She may be very good at it, but she certainly doesn't *enjoy* it."

"Hmmm." Andoa's gaze shifted to Cass. "Well, let's hear from it her. Cass, you don't believe there's any way you could use violence to get something you want here? Say, the release of your little comrades back onto the planet?"

Cass focused on a point on Andoa's forehead, roughly equidistant between eir six eyes. *Focus*, she told herself. *Do not, under any circumstances, look down at Nell*. "I can think of *ways*, yes. They might even work, short-term. *Very* short-term. I spend a lot of time thinking, and I have a habit of looking for the weak points in systems."

“And what, pray tell, is our weak point?” the Captain said, leaning forward, resting eir head on eir fist, and smiling down the table at her. Nell, squirming helplessly in eir chest, was brought along for the ride.

“You know as well as I do that it’s florets,” Cass said evenly. “You’d do anything to keep them safe — and the moment you could guarantee that safety, you’d come down on anyone threatening them like a ton of bricks. But for a very brief moment, you could get almost anything out of one of you that way, if you didn’t mind spending the rest of your life doped out of your mind. I think that probably applies, to a lesser extent, to *any* non-Affini, frankly. It’s all tied up in your egotism, your bizarre and paternalistic obsession with the idea that no one else but you is capable of taking care of themselves.”

“Our bizarre and paternalistic obsession, as you put it, has brought endless joy to uncountable beings throughout multiple galaxies,” Andoa replied, eir tone light. “I think we’re entitled to just a little egotism in light of that.”

“Nevertheless,” Cass said. “You wanted to know your weak point. There it is. It’s not much of one, considering what you’re able to back it up with, but it exists. I don’t think there’s a way to exploit that for any kind of concrete ends, not in the situation I’m in. Even if I somehow managed to get my people back down to the planet where they belong, the minute I was neutralized you’d just bring them right back up. I’d accomplish nothing in the end, and I’m not interested in waste.”

“Well, she definitely understands the concept of consequences,” Andoa said, looking back to Polyphylla. ’I’ll give her that.”

“Ironically, the central pillars of her psyche are very relatable.” Polyphylla tapped at her tablet, and the psyche map shifted to another, even more impenetrable diagram. “It’s clear, based on what you see here, that one of her primary motivating factors is actually *preventing* harm. Unfortunately, this expresses itself in numerous unhealthy ways, both caused by and interrelating with much of the trauma she’s experienced.”

Cass shivered. It had been one thing when Polyphylla had simply watched her for a little while before bulls-eyeing her dysphoric longing (which she absolutely was *not* going to dwell upon right this moment), but listening to her describe her own cognition in such a mechanistic way was deeply unsettling. Of course she wanted to keep others from being hurt! It was such a basic impulse, a common ethic shared by humanity, that it boggled her mind that Polyphylla was even bringing it up.

“Well, that does explain rather a lot,” Andoa said, nodding. “And what about you, flower?” e added in an aside to Nell. “Does that sound like Cass do you?” Nell made a furious noise and did her best to thrash, but barely moved. “Mmmmm. Well put,” e added, chuckling darkly.

Cass’s shivers turned to a rolling feeling in her stomach. “Do you *really* have to do that?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Andoa said, grinning. “I value her input a great deal.”

The meeting went on and on like this, half disturbing psychoanalysis from an alien plant that saw Cass more as a machine in need of maintenance than as a person with things like dignity

or natural rights, half the Captain's commentary and occasional creepy asides to Nell. The other dozen Affini in the room, most of whom Cass had never met, interjected with questions or comments occasionally, and Cass found herself keeping a mental tally of who she thought was on her side and who would vote to scramble her brain.

At least Tsuga was there. They weren't sitting near each other, but every so often their eyes would meet, just for a moment before Tsuga slid her leafy eyelids down to shade them. In those moments Cass recalled the feeling of being sprawled in Tsuga's lap, things like worry and panic distant memories that slipped through her fingers whenever she tried to grasp them.

It had been the happiest she'd been in a long time, and that terrified her. Was Tsuga slowly domesticating her all on her own, no matter what she said? Was it all some kind of a long con, with her as the prize? Would Tsuga do that to her? She didn't think so, but the fear was still there, even when Tsuga spoke up for her — and she did, several times. "This comes back to her wanting to *prevent* harm," Tsuga was saying when Cass came back to herself. "At least, from her point of view."

"By ordering her comrades to disperse into a freezing wilderness that can't possibly sustain them?" This was one of the Affini Cass didn't know, a Nephra Sero-something — Sero*tina*, she finally remembered. "That doesn't sound like harm reduction to me, and I know for a fact we've had several terrans come up with injuries on top of the malnutrition they all seem to have."

"And given her history, I think it's understandable why she would elevate personal agency in the face of overwhelming power to such a high value in her decision-making," Tsuga replied. "Was it the correct decision? Of course not, and I think she'd agree with that herself at this point, given our progress in rescuing the terrans on the surface."

"It was definitely not as effective as I'd hoped," Cass grumbled. "And for the record, we're not just running off into the woods. We *planned* this over three years, and we established supply caches. Honestly, now that we're on emergency footing, there's a lot of people who are probably eating better now than they have been in three years. You need calories to be alert, to defend yourself, to run." In a darkly amused tone, she added, "You know, if you were an Accord warship, you'd be pulling your hair out over this. It was a good plan."

"Thankfully, we're not," Andoa put in. "Though your reticence in offering assistance in locating the remaining hideaways your people are using is not casting you in the best light."

Cass squared herself, sitting up straight and once again looking Andoa right between eir six eyes. "Even if this isn't working as the leverage I wanted it to be, I won't betray them."

"It's not *betraying* them," Nephra said, "It's *helping* them."

"They chose to hide," Cass said, glaring back across the table at her. "I'm not like you: I won't take that choice away from them."

"Cass, you *told* them to hide." Andoa was once more leaning eir head on eir fist. "We haven't forgotten that."

“I recommended it, yes. Just because I recommended it doesn’t mean I *made* them. That’s not how we do things.”

Andoa chuckled. “You think so? Because from my conversations with little Nell here, I have had a *very* different picture of the great Cass Hope painted for me. *You*, my dear, are the Great Revolutionary, despite your choice of politics, an inscrutable genius whose thorn-sharp mind manages a thousand thousand inputs and outputs all at once. You know you’re the only person she’d trust to handle logistical issues besides her? From Nell,” e added in an aside to the other Affini, “this is *extremely* high praise. And she assures me that she’s far from the only one who sees you in this way. A *hint* from you might as well be an *order* to a fair proportion of your comrades.”

Cass felt her blood run cold. “Nell told you that?” she said, her voice far weaker than she would have wanted it.

“She did. Oh, but don’t fear, little one! She’s told me nothing that compromises operations. She’s a *fighter*, this one. Oh, I’m *very* fond of her.” The vines around Nell slithered and tightened, making Nell squeak.

“Stop that,” Cass hissed. Every time the Captain teased Nell like that, it was like someone had seized her by the gullet and was squeezing.

“But she loves it so,” Andoa said, running eir fingers through Nell’s hair.

“Captain, please,” Tsuga said. “You’re distressing her.”

“Oh, very well. It’s about time for her to get a break, anyway. Nell, how would you like to catch up with Cass, hmmm?” Nell nodded frantically, and Andoa laughed. “Alright, shall we take a break and reconvene in just a little while, then?” There were noises of assent from around the room, and Andoa’s vines slipped loose, gently guiding Nell to the ground and rubbing at her extremities. “Remember, flower, don’t just sit still, walk around and get the blood moving.”

“I *know*,” Nell growled, hugging herself and shivering — she wasn’t wearing anything besides her underclothes. Andoa pulled a brightly-patterned green and yellow blanket out from inside emself and wrapped it around Nell’s shoulders, and she added a grudging “thanks.”

“Have fun, you two,” e said, standing up and patting Nell on the head. Cass was on her feet and had her arms around Nell long before even half of the Affini had filtered out of the room. The two simply stood there for a long moment, leaning into one another, before Nell finally spoke.

“Sorry,” she muttered into Cass’s shoulder. “I kinda fucked it all up. Everything that went wrong is because of me.”

“No,” Cass whispered, shaking her head. “No, I didn’t think it through. I missed obvious things.” She wasn’t about to let Nell take all this weight on herself. *She* was the one who had ruined everything, as usual.

“Just shut up and let someone else take some responsibility for once, okay?” Nell pulled back, looked up at Cass. “Are you alright? They haven’t been fucking with you or doping you up or anything? Like what the fuck even *is* this psyche map thing?!”

“It’s just…” She took a deep breath, collected her thoughts. “They put me under and replayed all my memories and took notes. I don’t understand half of it, but they didn’t do anything to me while I was under. Tsuga was there the whole time, and she promised me she wouldn’t let Polyphylla do anything like that.”

“And you trust…her? I guess it *is* her, huh?” When Cass nodded, Nell went on. “You trust her to *not* fuck with you, the alien plant from the species of alien plants whose entire purpose in life is to fuck with you?”

“I do,” Cass replied. “She and I, we… we have an understanding, and she doesn’t trust herself enough to domesticate anyone. That’s enough for me. How about you, are *you* okay? What the hell is the Captain *doing* to you?”

“Oh, *stars*,” Nell said, rolling her eyes actually smiling a little. “It’s fucking ridiculous, Cass. E hasn’t *done* anything! E just ties me up, fucks me until I can’t take it anymore, then just cuddles me and brushes my hair and cooks for me while we talk about Marxism. That’s *it!*”

Cass stared at Nell. “You’re *fucking* the Captain?” This was *not* what she’d expected to hear from Nell of all people.

“Ugh, it’s not *like* that,” Nell said, the smille falling away. “I’m not some plantfucker, I mean, I guess *literally* I sort of am at this point, but it’s just a fucking *game*. That’s what e calls it, anyway. E just fucking… *tickles* me, slaps me, does shit to me, and I’m supposed to try to outlast eir fucking timer without begging for… for it to stop.” She flushed bright red and looked away. “If I can beat the timer, if I can hold on long enough, e says I don’t have to get domesticated.”

“And you believe that?” Cass didn’t ask what the look was about — maybe there was something else the Captain was doing to her that was too much for her to talk about, and she was simply putting on a brave face. That was very Nell, Cass thought, and so she didn’t pry.

“Well, I mean… e could just *do* it whenever e wants to, I don’t exactly have a lot of options,” Nell said. “And if e *does* keep eir word, I think I can probably convince em to keep gambling on this game even after I win. Gamblers are like that, they always have to chase the next high! Maybe I could even get everyone turned loose, get us back to the planet!”

“Nell, they’re never going to do that,” Cass said, sighing and crossing her arms. “Even *if* the Captain keeps eir word.”

“E’s the fucking captain!” Nell protested. “E can do whatever e wants!”

“Yes, but they won’t *let* it happen,” Cass went on, not entirely sure that the Captain had that kind of authority in the first place — Tsuga had told her the position was elective, after all. “You heard them during the meeting! And anyway, you haven’t beaten the Captain yet, or you wouldn’t have been sitting there all tied up!”

Nell grinned and leaned in close to whisper, “Yeah, well, see, at first, every time I got close to beating the timer, e would just extend it. Provide a better challenge for me, according to em, the fucking liar. So, *I’m* lying too. *That’s* the real game, I realized.” There was a vicious little twinkle in her eye that Cass recognized, familiar from oh so many arguments when she thought she had the upper hand. “I’m sandbagging. The last few times, I’ve tapped out *way* before I was spent. I’m building up my stamina and maybe in a few more sessions, I’m going to go for broke, and I *know* I can win!”

“Flower~” Andoa called from across the room, where e was chatting with Tsuga one-on-one, “I don’t see cute little terran legs walking~”

“Uuuuugh!” Nell spun on the spot and began walking further away, and Cass followed. “Look, I know what this looks like, but I have it under control, I promise. I’m going to get out of this, and I’m going to do whatever I can to get *you* out of this. That’ll be my first raise of the stakes once I win, if they vote to implant you — me and you, all or nothing.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Cass said. “I…look, I don’t *want* to be domesticated, obviously, but I have a fallback.”

“A *fallback?*” Nell bit her lip. “Some kind of escape plan? Did you hack their computers?”

“No, I just– Tsuga put in paperwork that says that if they *do* vote to domesticate me, she gets first crack at it, and she’s promised not to screw with my head beyond maybe doing something about my nightmares.”

Nell froze on the spot, then turned to stare at Cass, eyes wide. Cass almost ran right into her. “Are you *out of your fucking mind?!*”

“Nell, sweetie, don’t yell,” Andoa called, obviously enjoying having to do so judging by the massive grin on eir face.

“Fuck off, this is a private conversation!” she shouted back across the room before turning back to Cass. “Are you out of your fucking *mind?!*” she hissed again. “You *want* the fucking tree to domesticate you?!”

“No,” Cass said through gritted teeth, “but if it’s going to happen, I want it to be the tree that *likes me the way I am*.”

“Have you *seen* what they do to people when they domesticate them?!” Nell said. She still hadn’t blinked once. “It’s like they take a fucking ice cream scoop to their brain! They’re strung out and barely aware of what’s going on around them!”

“Some of them, yeah,” Cass said, feeling a mote of irritation growing behind her eyes. “I’ve been living with someone I thought was like that when I first met her, actually, and it turns out… there’s a lot more going on than I thought there was. It’s true she’s not the person she was, but… the person she was was miserable, actively suicidal, and wanted that to stop, and now she’s *happy*. And I can’t bring myself to be mad about that. And I’ve met other florets who are totally lucid, lucid enough to run a restaurant!”

“And you think Tsuga’s going to let you be *you* enough to run a restaurant?” Nell spat. “You don’t think she’s just going to core you out and make an emotional chew toy out of you, like this girl you’ve been living with?”

“No, I don’t,” Cass retorted, an edge of anger creeping into her voice, “because I trust her. And Leah’s *not* an emotional chew toy.”

“You are *walking into the lion’s den*,” Nell said, glaring, “and you don’t even see it! She’s got you *wanting* to be a drugged-out little w–“

Cass’s hand snatched out and grabbed a fistful of Nell’s blanket, jerking her forward. “Don’t you *dare* call her that,” she snarled, her free hand a half-cocked fist.

“I… I wasn’t *gonna*,” Nell said, going pale. “I *could*, I just… fuck, Cass, why do you *want* this?”

“I *don’t*,” Cass replied. Every muscle in her body tensed as her anger peaked, a heat that she was sure even Nell could feel before it began to fade. “But I’m not enough of a fool to not have a backup plan, and *this* is the best I can swing.” It was pointless to fight. They needed each other if they were going to make it through this. She let her fist drop and sighed, her other hand releasing Nell. “I *don’t* want this… but I want one of the ones who *don’t* respect me to get me a lot *less*, and I’ve met exactly two Affini I think are decent people. One is Tsuga, and the other, well, he’s nice, I don’t want to spend the rest of my life programmed to laugh myself sick at dad jokes.”

Nell stared at Cass for a moment, then chuckled. “Okay, fair,” she admitted. “He’s not bad, but I wouldn’t want that either.”

“Look,” Cass said, putting a hand on each of Nell’s shoulders, “you have your plan. I have mine. Neither of us like them very much, but it’s what we’ve got to work with.”

“Alright…” Nell nodded. “If nothing else, there’s still Operation Double or Nothing. So if they *do* vote against you, just do what you can to delay it, alright?”

“I appreciate that,” Cass said, “and Tsuga might even go along with it, but I’m not going to tell her about Operation Double or Nothing — which by the way is a terrible name for opsec purposes — because I’m sure she’ll feel compelled to tell the Captain.”

“…fair enough. Just dig in your heels, and I’ll do the same,” Nell said. “…sorry about yelling.”

“It’s alright,” Cass said. “We’re in the shit. It happens. You’ve just gotta push through it.” She pulled Nell into another hug, and held her there for a long moment. “…is what the Captain said earlier true? The way you think about me?”

“Fuck you, Cass,” Nell said, softly and without any ire, as she let her head rest on Cass’s shoulder.

"…it means a lot to me. Thank you," Cass said, smiling. Even she could read what Nell really meant by 'fuck you,' and while she may not have deserved the affection or the respect, considering how badly she'd botched everything up, it was nice to know she had a friend who understood her.

"Are you sure you want this?" the Captain said, fixing Tsuga with a hard stare — but Tsuga's eyes were still on Cass, across the room, where she was hugging Nell. It was very sweet to see the two of them together again. Hopefully, they could spend more time together in the near future.

"I know what I'm doing," she replied, stilling her vines confidently. "And I know what I want."

"Because it sounds an awful lot like you're trying to convince the committee to let your terran go," Andoa went on. "And you're doing a good frosting job of it, too. Are you aware of that?"

"Well, I wasn't certain, but I was hoping, yes," Tsuga said. She finally glanced down at the Captain. "Why, do you have a problem with it?"

"Not a problem so much as a tremendous amount of confusion. Why would you file a Notice of Intent to Domesticate if you didn't *intend* to *domesticate*?"

"Oh." E must have checked before the meeting. Well, that was very Andoa-like behavior — from what Tsuga had seen and from what she'd heard from colleagues, the Captain was extremely thorough and detail oriented, even if e didn't always seem it outwardly. "Yes, I did file that, but I didn't file it for me. I filed it for Cass."

"… for Cass." E put eir hands on eir hips and cocked eir head — a very terran gesture that reminded Tsuga of the way Cass would look up at her when she got annoyed. "Explain."

Tsuga's eyes went back to Cass. "She was nervous about the wardship coming to an end, because she was afraid given her history we'd all summarily vote for domestication. I offered her the Notice to give her a bit of comfort that, even if our decision goes against her, she gets to be with someone she knows and trusts, and who will restrain herself to a minimum of changes in the domestication process."

Andoa stared up at her, eyes roiling with a confusing whorl of colors. "You *want* to domesticate this terran."

"Yes," Tsuga admitted. "Very much."

"A terran under wardship who could, by the end of the day, be slated for domestication."

"Yes, I'm aware of the possibility."

"But you're arguing against it!" Andoa said gesturing at Tsuga with an open hand. "Why?"

"…it's hard to explain," Tsuga said. She riffled her foliage to signal she was still in thought while she tried to put the words together in her head. "I think that… I want her to want it. I don't want it to be that she was forced. I want her to want *me*. And I want her to want that herself." Yes. Yes, that would do.

"…*well*," Andoa said, a grin breaking out across eir face. "I had you down as a romantic, sure, but I had no idea you were *that* much of a romantic." E laughed and glanced over eir shoulder. "Flower~" e called. "I don't see cute little terran legs walking~" Nell made an irritated noise and started walking. "So," e added, turning back to Tsuga, "you don't want a win by default, you want her to come to you. *That* I can understand. I had no idea we were so alike! I'm almost there with Nell, in fact!"

"Oh?" Tsuga glanced back at the Captain and matched eir smile; that *was* good news. "She still seems to have a lot of fight left in her."

"She does, yes, but I think within a few more sessions, unless I'm much mistaken, I'll have her good and ready to break. And *then*, oh, the fun we'll have. The boots will be off at last!"

"The…boots?" She glanced across the room to make sure she'd seen right, and yes, Nell was barefoot already.

"Oh, it's a terran expression. It means I'll be done going easy on her."

Across the room, Tsuga saw Nell suddenly stop and turn to face Cass, staring up at her wide-eyed. "…out of your *fucking mind?!*"

"Nell, sweetie, don't yell," Andoa called, eir grin growing wider.

"Fuck off, this is a private conversation!" Nell shouted back before lowering her voice.

"See? She still sounds awfully feral," Tsuga said, watching her and Cass carefully.

"Oh, she is *very* feral," Andoa went on, cackling softly. "That's why she's so much *fun*. Surely you feel the same about Cass, considering this gambit of yours."

"It's not a gambit," Tsuga said. "I care about her, and I want her to be happy, and yes, I think she'd be happiest domesticated, but– but she'd be my first floret. Is it selfish that I want it to be special? I really do think she's able to function on her own…but I also think that she's going to volunteer for it before too long."

"Mmmm. I agree there," Andoa said, nodding. "She's not a creature for a universe like the one we're building. She'll be a restless mess on her own."

"You're only seeing reports, don't forget. I've spent more time at Polyphylla's hab than my own of late."

"Glad to hear that," Andoa mused, and when Tsuga gave em a confused twisting of her vines, e added, "Oh, it's nothing, don't worry about it."

"…yes, well, anyway, she is changing, slowly, now that the pressure she remade herself to endure is gone. She allowed me to entrance her not too long ago, and she's developed a very strong relationship with Polyphylla's floret, Leah, after being equally reticent about such things not too long before. And I've been preparing myself, in case the committee voted for domestication." She flexed a few of the blossoms she was keeping hidden inside her, essentials for domestication as well as one little present for Cass she'd had grafted over the last week, the last just the night before.

"Good to know you've got this well in vine, then," Andoa said. "But be careful she doesn't slip away from you after this." E paused for a moment, and used the hand-on-chin gesture to indicate thought. "Hmmm. What if, say, I officially ask you to keep an eye on her, just in case? Not a wardship, just frequent wellness checks, from someone she demonstrably gets along with?"

"I certainly wouldn't mind an excuse to see her," Tsuga said. "I was thinking I might invite her to continue to stay with me, if she wanted, but…having a safety net of my own would be appreciated. Thank you, Captain."

"Just doing my part," e said, grinning and giving Tsuga a very terran clap on the shoulder. "Don't worry, I have no doubt your cute little grey-stripe will find her way to you soon enough."

Chapter End Notes

Five more chapters... maybe even four depending on how things shake out. @_@ So close, so close...

Chapter 25: Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

In which things don't go quite as planned.
Content warnings: Bondage, sensation play, emotional dependence, and sweet sweet drugs. Also, Nikolai, but just for the first bit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The grey-green sprawl of the Elysium Valley was giving way to the foothills, and the road was transitioning from a sleep-inducing straightaway to white-knuckle curves. Nikolai could hear the plastic barrels rattling against each other, and probably against the guys in back, even over the noise of the road, which was not exactly well-maintained. Every so often he would miss a pothole until it was too late, and his jaw still ached a little from the one they'd hit on the way out that had nearly sent them off the road.

"Can't believe we fuckin' pulled this off," Keeler said, shivering in the passenger seat. They were running without the heater, and the night was cold even with summer approaching — the lowlands were already seeing a thaw, but there was usually a lining of frost come morning even there.

"Oh, ye of little faith," Nikolai replied, grinning. He had no idea where the line came from, but he'd heard Cass say it once, and he had to admit it had sounded pretty badass. He'd always wanted an excuse to say it, and this seemed like a good time. Their mission had been entirely successful from the jump: they'd secured the truck without any issues, made it out without being stopped by anyone, and driven all the way down to the ag depot outside Woolman where Harriman said they still had loads of pre-revolt stuff stored.

And they'd found exactly what they needed, not just the industrial herbicide but other things they'd need too — chemical-protection respirators, protective gear to keep the shit off of them, sprayers that could sling the stuff a dozen yards or more. Just in case that wasn't enough, and Nikolai had a feeling it wouldn't be, they'd also secured a half-dozen leaf-blowers — with a little kludging, it stood to reason they'd throw a *lot* more weedkiller than the little sprayers would. He couldn't want to get his hands on one of *those* puppies and hose one of the fuckers down properly.

Yeah, he thought. *This is where we turn things around. Just like the movies*. Shit, they'd probably want to make a movie about this, wouldn't they? He wondered who they'd get to play him, or if he could just play himself. He was a pretty good actor, he figured, and then he'd get to double dip on the big actor bucks *and* the rights to the story. A big feel-good propaganda victory like this, they wouldn't just trust to a computer — like the slogan said, Too Real For the Algorithm!

"How long you think it's going to take for the weeds to spot the setup once we get it finished?"

"Not long," Nikolai said. "They move fast, so we'll have to be ready." None of the guards believed that the convicts would welcome them back with open arms after they commandeered the truck, even if it was for the war effort, so they'd swiped enough rations to last a week and enough tools and supply to put together a fake hidey-hole they'd let leak heat like a sieve. They had a spot picked out and everything, a side tunnel of the mine that had been separated from the main branch by the quakes and cave-ins — big enough to park the truck in, close enough for the convicts to *see* it work, but not so close that they'd find them before the weeds did.

What a stars-damned perfect plan, Nikolai thought. The weeds wouldn't know what hit 'em. He squinted at the light playing off the rocky slope ahead of him as he steered the truck around the bend, then glanced at his watch to confirm what his gut told him. It was only 3 AM — the sun couldn't be coming up yet. "The fuck is that…?"

"What?" Keeler leaned forward. "I can't see shit out there, gimme the specs."

"Not while I'm fuckin' driving," Nikolai spat back. "It's a light, indirect, just over there." He pointed with one hand as he straightened the truck out. Now it was even more obvious, and Keeler made a noise of acknowledgment.

"Okay, I see it now," he said. "The fuck *is* that?"

"No idea," Nikolai said. It was a *weird* light, a dark violet that barely felt like a light at all when he gave it a quick look without the specs. "I don't like it, though."

"Yeah, me either. Maybe pull over and we check it out on foot?"

"Yeah, good thinking," Nikolai said, spying a place just ahead where the truck wouldn't get stuck if he pulled off to the side. "Man, what the *fuck* is that? Get the guys ready, and load up one of those sprayers, just in case."

After a bit of cursing and fumbling, one of the sprayers was attached to a tank, and they headed out on foot, crunching their way through the snow and slush at the side of the road. Even without the specs, the eerie glow on the mountain was bright enough to navigate by, like cityglow or a full moon night — they threw long, strange shadows behind them as they walked that gave Nikolai the creeps. What he saw when they rounded the next corner was worse.

It was just one limb of the weed ship, but it was enough to know what was going on. It was hovering at the end of the steephead valley the mine's main entrance was in, its underside glowing in that just-barely-visible violet. Nikolai kicked himself mentally for not recognizing it before. The light was dim enough that, at a distance, he couldn't make out any details, but he thought he saw shapes moving, and they weren't moving like terrans moved.

"Get down!" he hissed, dragging Keeler into the dead and frozen bushes by the side of the road. The others followed. "Fuck, they must have hit the place right after we left!"

"Lucky we didn't delay a day," Harriman mumbled.

"Hey fuck you," McCloskey snarled, "I didn't know!"

"Shut up!" Nikolai whispered.

"We gotta get in there and fuck the weeds up!" Keeler said. "Gimme that sprayer, Harriman!"

"Are you *nuts?*" Realizing how cowardly it made him sound, Nikolai quickly added, "that's shit tactics, man. We've got to try to take the ship while they're all down in the mine!"

"Shit, that's a good point," McCloskey said, nodding. "We don't know how many of those things are on one of those."

"So, what, you wanna take the ship and just *let* the weeds have a go at everyone else?" In the lambent glow of the alien ship, Nikolai could see Keeler's eyebrows knitting — he probably had a few people he cared about in there, convicts who hadn't stabbed him in the back yet. It was understandable, but if he didn't get a handle on this situation soon, shit was going to go south in a hurry.

"Alright," he said, holding up a hand. "There's six of us. We send four to the ship, alright? One of the leaf blowers with 'em. Two of us take the other two leaf blowers, and we set up at the entrance to the mine, we make some noise, and when they all come charging up out of there, we can hose 'em right down!" He didn't like breaking people off from the ship, which was the actually important thing here, but he needed Keeler on his side more.

"They're gonna button up tight once they realize what's happening," Keeler muttered, glancing back at the mine. "They're not all gonna come up, so once we get the ship, we go in hard."

"I can get behind that," Nikolai said, nodding. "Come on, fuck freezing our asses off in a ditch here, we've got work to do."

"Staaaaars!" Nell moaned as she bucked against her restraints — but Andoa's vines were far too tight for her to escape, and all she did was inflame her desire even more, which was exactly what the Captain wanted. *Stop that, stop that!* Nell told herself. *You're playing into eir hands with that!* With a shuddering breath, she mastered the impulse to grind, reminding herself that it wouldn't give her any relief.

“Still fighting?” Andoa purred. The room, same as it ever was, was mostly unlit save for the area around Nell, and Andoa was making good use of the shadow as e slipped in and out to tease her. “My my, aren’t we feisty today?”

“Fuuuuuck oooooff,” Nell whimpered, allowing herself a glance at the timer. Two segments left, and the outer circle almost gone. One segment left. Just one segment. She could do this. She bore down on her lip and squeezed her eyes shut, willing herself to ignore the heat in her loins, the sharp electricity behind her navel, the sweaty tingling of every inch of skin she had. Her hair was plastered to her scalp, and her toes just barely brushed the floor. Her arms, bound behind her back, desperately twitched as she involuntarily tried to touch herself.

“Such a naughty mouth on such a sweet girl,” Andoa said, chuckling as eir vines teased at Nell’s lips. “No biting, flower,” e purred as she tapped Nell’s cheek. Without thinking, Nell opened her mouth, and the vines slid inside to play with her tongue.

“Aaaaah,” she whimpered around them, her back arching as she shuddered. *Just one segment. Just one more and we’re done. Just one more*. It was a mantra she repeated to herself as the vines caressed her, as more vines slid around her body to tease her elsewhere. One nipple sang out in pain as a vine pinched it, while the other quivered as a feathery frond brushed past it. Without thinking, she bucked against the vines slithering around her hips and thighs again, and her need banked higher and higher.

“So eager, so fierce,” Andoa purred. “So lovely like this. Oh, if only your tender little body could take it, I’d keep you this way *all the time*.” Nell almost wept; if it wasn’t for the Class-N leashing her, the words alone would have made her come as they rolled through her. It was *so much*, it was *too much*. She couldn’t bear it, and her mouth was open — all she’d have to do was to let out a cry in the pattern Andoa had taught her, and she’d get the relief she needed.

No! Nell thought, clamping down on her vocal cords. *Just one more. Just one more. Almost there. Almost there!* She didn’t dare look. Every second would be like an eternity if she let herself follow the sweep of the outer ring as it oh-so-slowly disappeared. She wouldn’t let em win again. This time, *this* game, she was going to win. And then, everything was going to change.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” e said, eir voice a whisper in her ear. “Tied up like a little ornament that I carry around with me to show off? And oh, I do *love* to show you off. My good girl. My Nell.”

Just one more. All of eir vines tightened, a pressure that threatened to rip the signal to stop from her, but Nell held fast.

“A good little floret.” E was silent for a long moment, then sighed. “Ah, what might have been. Open your eyes, petal.” There was a gentle pressure on Nell’s cheek as Andoa’s vines retreated from her mouth, and when she opened her eyes she saw the Captain cradling her head in one enormous hand, eir thumb resting delicately on her cheek. With a featherlight touch, e directed Nell’s gaze away from emself (and oh, how Nell whimpered) to the wall, to the timer — the timer, the outer ring blinking slowly, the inner track empty.

“I… I did it?” Nell said, her voice weak.

“You did. Are you ready?” The familiar needle rose back up and stung her, and as the last of Andoa’s vines slipped free and she fell limply into eir arms, she felt the orgasm coursing through her powerful as ever. She whimpered and moaned and cried out as Andoa’s mossy body surrounded her in a powerful hug. Tears streamed down her face as she felt herself wash away, as she lost herself to the storm of relief inside her. “Good girl. Good girl, Nell. Oh, how I’m going to miss this.”

She made no response, had no response to make. Even as Andoa stood, carrying her out into the misty, mossy common area of eir hab, she simply lay there, the echoes of ecstasy rushing from her fingertips to her heart and back again. The rushing of water as the tub filled slowly brought her back, as did the straw held to her lips. “Drink, little one,” Andoa said, and she did, and it was sweet and sour and good.

“I…hey,” she mumbled, a drunken smile finally making its way to her face. “Told you…. didn’t I?”

“You did,” Andoa said, smiling. “Let’s get you cleaned up.” Nell nodded, and let Andoa run through the bath routine that she was well used to after the last few weeks, letting eir vines do most of the work, responding to taps and directions when she needed to, and relaxing in the warm water as her tired body finally began to relax after yet another ordeal.

“So… got a proposal for you,” Nell said as Andoa pulled her out of the water and began to towel her off. She was just able to stand on her own, though her legs were still very wobbly. “Double or nothing.”

“Double or nothing?” Andoa said, one of the fronds that served as eir eyebrows lifting just a bit. It really was amazing, Nell thought, how much effort e put into seeming terran. Not amazing. Creepy. Well. Creepy *and* amazing.

“We go again, same rules, but I’m not just playing for me this time — I’m playing for me and Cass.”

Andoa chuckled and began to towel off Nell’s hair. “What a cute idea, but no.”

“What do you mean, *no?*” Nell said, reaching up and trying to bat the towel away, without much success.

“Well, for one thing, the committee voted to allow Cass to remain independent,” the Captain said, “so you don’t *need* to go making any heroic gestures like that. Very heroic, though. I do approve.”

“Alright, fine,” Nell said, as Andoa draped the towel around her shoulders. “How about this — we play for bigger stakes: same rules, but instead, we’re playing for *everyone*. The right to go back down to the planet.”

“Flower,” Andoa said, “I know you enjoyed yourself, but I can’t possibly take a wager like that.” E ruffled Nell’s hair with a vine gently. “It would be deeply irresponsible of me to

endanger you all just for my enjoyment."

"It's not– but I– look, don't you *want* to do more of this?!" Nell cried.

"Nothing would make me happier," Andoa replied, "but you're not my floret anymore, remember? You won. You have your freedom. I'll compile some clothes for you, and you can head down to the Office of Terran Adaptation and Assistance for Solstice, and they'll set you up with a hab of your own. If there's one good thing that came of all this silly hiding, it's that it gave us time to set up enough habs for all of you!"

"You're not…you're not going to take any more bets?" Nell's heart felt like it had been cored out, a cold chill coming over her that had nothing to do with having just stepped from a hot bath. There had to be a way around this. There had to be a way to get Andoa back into the game! "But…"

"No buts, little one," Andoa said, standing up to eir full height. "I am the Captain, you know, and that's an awful lot of work I've been having to put off here and there that I really should be catching up on, now that I don't have you to look after."

Nell felt like she was sleepwalking. Andoa guided her out into the common room, offered her clothes that she mechanically put on instead of letting em dress her, and took the bag of personal effects that e held out to her. "But, isn't there–?"

"Shhhh." Andoa knelt down again, reaching out to stroke Nell's hair. "You're a tough, brave, independent sophont, remember? You'll do just fine on your own. Hab, go ahead and unlock the front door and open it."

"You got it!" the hab chirped, and the door slid open. For the first time in weeks, Nell saw the outside world without being tied up and trapped inside Andoa's chest, and she stared for a long moment at it before turning back to em.

"Go on," Andoa said. "Your tablet will show you how to get where you need to go."

"But I–" Nell's mouth had gone dry, her hands were slick with sweat, and her heart was pounding in her chest. *What's wrong with me?* she thought. *Take what you can get! Go! Get out before e changes eir mind!* "I don't–"

"You don't what, flower?" Andoa said, eir voice perfectly innocent.

Nell forced down a rough, painful swallow, gritted her teeth, and turned. She made it three steps before she stopped and turned back. "But what if–" She didn't know how to finish it. She didn't know what she wanted to say, or do. Her plans had fallen completely apart, and she was left with nothing. "Can we…still talk about….about theory? Because… you're still getting it wrong."

"Am I?" Andoa laughed. "Nell, I would love to continue discussing communist theory with you. I'm looking forward to getting into the historical context of Maoism! We'll chat over the network, okay? I'll look you up, so don't worry about it. I promise I won't forget."

“O-okay,” Nell said. Somehow, she didn’t feel any better, but she made herself turn and take another step, and then another. She made it to the threshold this time before she stopped. She could see out into the ship now, a world nine kilometers long, the far side of the ring sprawling above in the sky beyond the sunline. It yawned wide and impossibly deep, and it was just a single ship — she knew there were others, thousands of others, *millions* of others, ships this size and ships far larger, spreading across the cosmos in a wave of revolution.

And it *was* a revolution — it was the death of capital, albeit not how Marx or Lenin or any other terran had envisioned it. Where the Affini went, they left plenty and peace in their wake, and all they demanded was the right to administer it to ensure it didn’t fall apart the moment they left. Somehow, a species of giant alien plants was the perfect revolutionary vanguard for a slightly off-kilter revolution.

And it worked. That was the most baffling thing, the thing not accounted for, the thing she couldn’t point to theory and disprove. They hadn’t independently developed Marxist analysis and Leninist theory, they’d simply done what came naturally to them. They spread across the universe, dismantling exploitation and oppression. And it *worked*.

“Nell, is everything alright?” Andoa hadn’t moved, was watching her from the common room, the mist ever-so-slightly blurring eir form. Eir six eyes were amber points of light in the dim shadows.

“I–“ Her voice caught, and she swallowed again before turning. “I don’t…I *can’t*…”

“Petal,” e purred. “What do you want?”

Eir voice slipped over her skin like the tenderest caress as the thought bubbled up from deep inside: *You*. Nell squeezed her eyes shut as they began to tear up. *No, no, that’s impossible. I don’t want this!* But then why couldn’t she make herself leave? Why couldn’t she run to the freedom she supposedly wanted so badly?

“Come here, little one,” Andoa said, opening eir arms wide. Nell dropped her bag at her feet and began to shuffle back inside, tears now streaming down her face as she buried it in her hands. “Little one, shhh, shhh, why are you crying?” E took Nell into eir arms and held her tightly.

“I don’t wanna go,” she mumbled through tears and sobs. “I don’t– I don’t want it to be over!” *Why? Why would I want* more *of this?!*

“Well, there is one solution to that problem,” Andoa said, with the same sort of hungry edge in eir voice as e got during playtime when Nell lost herself in sensation. Nell looked up at em, the question joining the tears in her eyes, and Andoa let a wide grin show on eir face. “Ask.”

“Ask…?”

“To be my pet,” Andoa added, stroking her hair slowly. “To be my fourth floret.”

“B-but I…” Nell almost choked on the horror welling up inside her. *I can’t do that, can’t I?* But she absolutely could, and she knew it, and it terrified her. She could, so easily, let those words out of her, and she might not even regret them. She realized, now, that she’d misunderstood the game in its entirety. She was never competing with Andoa over individual orgasms, or beating some meaningless timer — it was all for this moment. *This* was the game. She could still win this. All she had to do was say–

“Please,” she heard herself whisper, as she stared up into those six beautiful eyes.

Andoa made a pleased sound deep in eir chest as Nell began to panic. “That was very nice, petal, but I need more. I need to know you mean it. I need you to *beg*.”

“Please!” Nell cried out before she could stop herself. “I don’t want it to stop, I don’t want to go away, *please!*” *Oh stars,* she thought, *what am I doing?!*

“Please…what?” Andoa purred, eir eyes flashing. They were enjoying this, it was obvious. E always got the same look whenever Nell tapped out during playtime — and for some reason, seeing Andoa happy was like a ray of joy that cut through her panic. It gave her the strength to do what came next.

Don’t, don’t say it! You don’t have to say it! Nell told herself, but the stillness in her heart, the soothing warmth of Andoa’s presence, spoke far, far louder. “Please let me be your floret!” she said, the tears starting up again.

“Oh, my precious little Nell,” Andoa said, squeezing Nell tightly. “You have *no idea* how much it pleases me to hear you say that.” There it came again, that burst of passive joy that reflected Andoa’s own, and Nell felt herself smiling despite herself, despite the rapidly diminishing voice inside pleading with her to take it back.

She didn’t *really* want this, did she? She didn’t want to be pampered, cared for, loved, intellectually engaged in philosophical debate, and then fucked senseless for hours by an alien plant twice her size with an encyclopedic knowledge of bondage techniques gleaned from across the stars. She didn’t want that to be every day of her life for the rest of her life. Did she?

What about her free will? What about the implant Andoa would put inside her? What about the freedom Andoa would strip from her? Even if she walked away, she would still have the revolution, still have the struggle, still have work she could meaningfully do, couldn’t she? But all those thoughts were dashed like waves on a seawall against a single thought, a thought that overturned all the worry and the frustration and the anger, a thought that made everything *make sense* again.

What good is freedom, she thought, *if it doesn’t come with em?*

Andoa had read Nell like a book from the very beginning, had seen every inch of her and had known exactly how to tame her. She should have seen it then, should have known there was no point in fighting — but then, her Captain *liked* that she fought, even if she never stood a chance of victory. She would have to keep fighting, then, just a little, just for fun. It would make em so happy. The warm smile on her face as she looked up into her Captain’s eyes must

have been like a thousand-foot-tall neon sign to em, because e smiled and laughed. “Ah, there we go,” e said. “Hello there, my floret.”

“H-hi,” she whispered back, her cheeks warming. Stars, was it going to feel like this *all the time*?

“No more confusion, no more heartache?” She shook her head — there *were* tears still running down her cheeks, but they weren’t the bad kind, not anymore, not the way her heart was swelling and singing with love. “Good. Good girl.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, closing her eyes and leaning into her Captain’s chest. One hand closed tenderly around a fistful of moss, soft and feathery. She had never been more comfortable in her life than in this moment.

“Nell, my love, the pleasure was all mine.”

There was something different about the air that afternoon, and Cass couldn’t quite pinpoint it. The poetic part of her mind (or, at least, the part of her mind that acted as a warehouse for all the poetry she’d memorized), naturally, attributed it to the cloud of the wardship having lifted and her freedom being assured. The Sword of Damocles was gone — she was Cass Hope, independent sophont again. The worst she had to worry about were “wellness checks,” and considering she lived with the Affini who would be “conducting” them, she wasn’t terribly concerned.

She’d given thought to moving out, of course, but had decided against it, firstly because she was done making major changes in her life for a while — it was enough that she was having to get used to the idea of the *Tillandsia* being her home for the foreseeable future — and secondly because having Tsuga around made it less likely she’d be bothered by some other Affini when out and about. Her knee now fully healed, she was still having to get used to the idea of the sky being a place she could walk to.

Case in point — the cluster of habitats she was approaching now was about two-thirds of the way around the ring Tsuga and the rest of the Welcoming Committee lived on, in what had been thick forest not two weeks before but was now something on the order of a charming little village, if one designed with Affini aesthetics firmly in mind. Everything was colorful, and seemed as if it had grown into its shape naturally over years, all connected by paths and a commons made up of smooth stones, mosses, and tough little flowers that didn’t mind the occasional footstep.

And there were terrans everywhere. It was the most terrans Cass had seen in one place weeks, and maybe for some time before that — spread out as they were, in groups here and there across the commons, it was entirely possible they numbered more than the usual population of Bulwark. There were Affini too, of course, some engaged in conversation with one or more terrans, but they were keeping a relatively low profile. As low a profile as one could keep when one was a 3-plus meter walking plant, anyway.

“Well, I’m glad to see everyone seems to be settling in well,” Tsuga said as she took in the scene. “I’ve had updates, of course, but I haven’t had the chance to make it out here myself.”

“It’s… a lot,” Cass said, sweeping her gaze across the curving horizon. There were clear sites where more habs were going up, little satellite villages stitched together like the rest of the ring, a mesh of homes and places of work.

“Certainly nicer than where I found you, yes?” Tsuga said, smiling down at her.

“In terms of creature comforts, I suppose I can’t deny that,” Cass admitted. She picked out one structure, larger than the others, and checked her tablet. “I think that’s it.”

“I think you may well be right. Shall we?”

“No time like the present.” Yet at the same time, Cass couldn’t help but feel apprehensive as she approached. She’d felt the odd little tickle in her stomach the entire way here, and now it was only getting worse, spreading out and crawling over her skin like a million little ants. *Calm down,* she told herself. *This is nothing new. You did this for over twenty years. It’s like riding a bicycle*.

The interior of the communal space was large, open, and airy — there was even a breeze inside that felt as natural as the one outside, never mind that both were very much not natural. The floor was some kind of carpet that stayed firm as one walked on it, but clearly gave enough to be comfortable when one sat down on it, judging from how many people were seated in a rough circle in the middle of the space.

Everyone looked back at her — well, at Tsuga, anyway — and the tickling in Cass’s stomach became a clenched fist. “Hey,” one man called, “this is an official meeting of the People’s Provisional Government of Solstice, you can’t just come in here!”

“Yeah, come on,” someone else added, “we *told* you about this.”

“Oh?” Tsuga said. “I’m sorry, no one informed me.”

“She’s alright,” Cass said, raising her voice so everyone could hear. “She’s with me.” There was a moment of silence, during which every eye in the room turned on her instead of on the enormous Affini next to her. *Not again not again not again*. She squelched the voice of panic and added, as confidently as she could, “Sorry I’m late.” It was the sort of thing they’d want to hear.

It only took seconds for her to be swarmed by a crowd all shouting from sheer excitement, pushing up against her, all touching to make sure she was real. She felt rather than heard the blood pounding in her ears. *Run, just run, don’t try to do this anymore*. Again, she squelched that selfish voice, raised two fingers to her lips, braced herself, and whistled loudly. Even through the cacophony of voices she felt the whistle like two icepicks, one in each eardrum.

Still, it had the desired effect — everyone calmed down, backed off, gave her space. She took a deep breath, steadied herself, and said, “What’s the situation?” She heard it, in bits and bobs, from one mouth or another as people began to settle back in. There were people there from as far west as Featherstone and as far east as Beacon. Between populations scattering or consolidating in backup shelters, there was little sense of individual outposts or settlements

when it came to how or when one arrived on the *Tillandsia*. The population was thoroughly intermixed, and all roughly within walking distance thus far.

It was an understandable impulse to try to rebuild the Provisional Government in conditions like those, but it left Cass feeling uneasy. The status quo had worked — democratic confederalism had *worked* — and it troubled her to see the same centralizing tendency spring right back up again. She would need to hook up with the Pan-Elysian Anarchist Confederation and work with them to fight back against the statist coalition. First, though, she had a responsibility to the people under her command, and she finally found someone from Bulwark in the crowd.

"He did *what?*" She stared at Forsythe, not quite believing what she was hearing.

"I know," he said, running a hand through his messy mop of brown hair. "Broke my glasses, damn near broke my jaw I think. Feeling better now, at least, and I got these compiled," he added, touching the pristine pair of specs on his face. "Better than the originals, honestly, and they've got this cool heads-up—"

"Forsythe, please stay on topic. What happened next?" If Nikolai had snapped like that, it wasn't a good sign. His politics had never been great, but he'd shown real signs of improvement over the years at Bulwark — if he hadn't, Cass wouldn't have let him stay there, no matter his and Nell's extremely rocky relationship.

"I couldn't tell you," he said, shrugging. "I got picked up at Twin Creeks like most of us, and he wasn't there so I assume he made it out."

"Oh, he made it out alright," a tired voice said from behind Cass, thick with irritation. "Then *we* had to deal with his ass."

Cass spun around. "Maggie?!" And there she was, grey-hair and crows-feet and all. Raeburn laughed and held out her arms, and Cass didn't hesitate. The hug was tight and warm and just as comforting as Cass remembered it. There was no room in her for her voice, for words, but the hug said everything she needed to in that moment. As it always did, comfort turned to the oppressive need to fidget, to move, and Raeburn clearly felt it in her, breaking the hug before Cass could ask. "How…when did you get here?" she finally said.

"Just a couple days ago," she said. "They came down on us all at once, bottled up every entrance to the mine — and then some jokers got the bright idea to try to gas the plants with herbicide. Oh, *that* got 'em mad," she said, laughing ruefully. "I woke up with a big shaggy wet mess of swamp standing over me, explaining that he was going to give me a shot to fix my cancer. *A* shot, singular," she added, grinning. "And I didn't believe it, but I woke up the next morning feeling like a trillion bucks. I can actually *breathe* again!"

"They're pretty good at that sort of thing, yeah," Cass said. She couldn't help but smile — when Raeburn had first gotten sick and had to retire from service at Bulwark, it had gutted Cass. She'd lost one of her few remaining friends from before the revolution and one of her best allies in the aftermath. "God, it's good to see you," she added in a whisper. *Mashallah. Thank you for this*, she thought to herself.

“Good to see you too,” she said. “We heard a lot from Forsythe here. About you being up for domestication.”

“I heard from Aletheia, yeah,” Forsythe said. “Before she went radio silent.”

“She’s high as a kite,” Cass said. “For surgery. The implant. But I’m fine,” she said firmly. “They were looking at making me go through with it too, but we talked them down.”

“Who’s we?” Raeburn said, raising an eyebrow. “Nell?”

“No, she’s with the Captain,” Cass said. “I meant Tsuga, here–“ She turned to look, but there was no sign of the Affini, and Cass felt her stomach plunge. *Where did she go?!* Even in the midst of dozens of terrans, she suddenly felt paradoxically lonely.

“Wait, wait, you had an Affini arguing *against* domestication?” Forsythe said, laughing uncertainly. “Sheesh, only you, Cass, only you could pull that off!”

“I’ve only been here a few days, but I’m inclined to agree,” Raeburn said. “They absolutely *will not* stop the hard sell.”

“Most of them are like that, yes. Tsuga is different.” *Mostly*. Cass was firmly ignoring that she knew full well that Tsuga *did* want to domesticate her, and was merely respecting her desire to *not* be domesticated. “The point is, I’m no longer at risk, and I want to get back to work.” Strictly speaking, a lie — she was terrified of it, but she was far more frightened of the alternative. So much had already happened because of her, because of her *mistakes*, and she couldn’t let anything else go wrong. “So, let’s get to work. Where are we caucusing?”

Hours, long tense hours filled with debate, with negotiation, with arguments, did nothing to improve either Cass’s mood or the outlook for the nascent government. Apparently, for all that everyone had pulled together after the Pillar of Fire and made things work in a distributed fashion, a good portion of the population of Solstice was entirely happy to go right back to statism — never mind that the lot of them were trapped on an alien starship in orbit around the planet they were ostensibly governing, powerless to effect any change whatsoever to the Affini program of environmental remediation and domestication.

And the Affini *were* domesticating them, that much was clear simply from anecdotal reports. How many, Cass couldn’t be sure, but she heard from multiple quarters of prisoners taken and not seen since, and it was all she could do to assure them that no, the rumors were not true, and they weren’t being eaten or anything like that. It felt odd, almost as if she were defending the Affini, but better that they know the true shape of their enemy than fight against the shadows concocted by their imaginations.

Cass made her goodbyes to her fellow anarchists, had another hug from Raeburn that was at once far too long and not nearly long enough, and then made her way around checking in with others from Bulwark before she filtered out of the communal space sometime well after dark. The sunline had dimmed to a dull glow, providing enough light to see but not enough to dazzle, and Cass’s eyes slowly adjusted as she made her way down the path.

“Ah, there you are.” Cass jumped — what she’d taken for a tree beside the path was actually Tsuga. Even now, Cass couldn’t quite make her out, just her shifting silhouette. “Did you have a productive day?”

“Not as productive as I’d like.” She squinted up at Tsuga, walking around her to try to force her brain to recognize her. “People are making a lot of the same old mistakes. It’s frustrating. How come you’re still here? I figured you’d have left hours ago.”

“I could hardly just leave you here,” she replied. “I know you’re independent, and I know you know how to find your way back to the hab on your own, but I thought you might get worried if I wasn’t here when you came looking. Besides,” she added, waving what Cass could now just barely make out as a tablet, “it was a good opportunity to get work done for the Welcoming Committee, and there’s plenty of that to go around.”

“…fair enough,” Cass said. “Sounds like you had a better day than I did.”

“Well, I got to meet a lot of very nice terrans, and I got to answer a lot of questions — which, by the way, I was able to do in no small part thanks to the discussions we’ve had, so thank you for that.”

Cass shrugged. “Let’s go. I’m tired.” Now that she wasn’t up to her eyes in forced socializing, arguing, and wrangling of votes, the fatigue was beginning to set in. *I’m not as young as I used to be*, she thought. *Time was I could do this all night.*

“Would you like me to carry you? Or…perhaps that should wait until we’re a little ways down the road?” Tsuga said, her soft chuckle a rolling sound that lifted Cass’s heart. “I know you have a reputation to maintain.”

“Maybe in a little while,” Cass said, starting out. The night enfolded then, the soft glow of the moss lining the path illuminating it in a gentle green that made it easy for them to find their way. “You organize yourselves autonomously,” she said after a moment.

“Yes,” Tsuga replied, easily keeping pace with Cass, each of her slow steps a soft *thump* beside her. “We choose where we wish to apply ourselves, and how we wish to contribute to the Compact’s common task.”

“But you have your bureaucracy. It’s *everywhere*.”

“The Compact is very large. Without bureaucracy, we’d never be able to organize things on a scale like that. Besides, it’s fun,” she added in a lighthearted tone.

“Yes, but–“ She paused to collect her thoughts, and the world slowly turned around her. The ship’s interior really was beautiful at night, the not-quite-stars of the far side of the ring glittering behind the dim sunline. “How do you keep the bureaucracy from eating everything? How do you keep corruption out? The possibilities for abuse must be enormous.”

“I suppose,” Tsuga said, “but it’s not really a problem. At least, not that I’m aware of, and I’ve been around long enough and experienced a broad enough perspective of the Compact that, if it were an issue, I don’t think I could have missed it up to now.”

“Okay, but you’re somehow coexisting as a largely anarchist society with something that only emerges out of a state’s need to govern in a top-down manner. Systems like that always engender authoritarianism. I just don’t see how it can *work*.”

Tsuga shrugged; Cass’s eyes had adjusted enough by now that she could see her vines rippling as she did so. “It does work. And, alas, comparative sociologistics has never been a strong interest of mine, so I only have my own understanding to draw upon, but…I think it works because we want it to, because it helps us do what matters most.”

“Find florets, you mean?” Cass said dryly.

“Help xenosophont life,” Tsuga said, “and yes, find florets. The two go together quite well, you know,” she added with a smile. Cass felt the corner of her mouth quirk in response. Tsuga’s smile had become weirdly infectious.

“Yeah, I guess from your perspective it does,” Cass admitted. “It’s just… it’s so *frustrating* to look at you, and see a society that’s *so close* to what I’ve been fighting for all my life — and let’s leave out the domestication and the florets and your two-class system and everything, just for the sake of argument, and focus on the structure of how you govern–” Her voice caught, and she swallowed back what might have been the beginning of tears. “For you to just *appear* one day, it’s like watching a dream come true and be strangled at the same time. Does that make sense?”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t.”

“You’ve *done* it all,” Cass went on. “You’ve figured out all the problems, you’ve built a fucking *bureaucracy* inside anarchism and it hasn’t taken over your society, a society that’s been around longer than *we* have as a species, and– and you just *appear* and it’s *there* and… and everything I’ve ever *done* just feels so meaningless.” She would not cry. She absolutely would not.

“I’m very sorry that we’ve made you feel that way. But look on the bright side — you get to live in that society now. We may not be exactly what you were striving for, but we’re close. You said so yourself.”

“Yeah, leaving off domestication and the fact that I’ll never be seen as your equal,” Cass said. “Look, how would you feel if you’d been spending your entire life working towards something, something everyone said was impossible, even dangerous, but then someone else out of nowhere turned up having already done it, having solved every possible problem with it. You get what I’m saying, don’t you?”

“I think perhaps I do, a little,” Tsuga said. “And, again, I’m sorry. But your life up to now isn’t meaningless just because we exist.”

“Bullshit,” Cass muttered as she slowed her pace, then came to a stop. Tsuga paused, and turned to look down at her. “It’s– Tsuga, I’ve hurt so many people. I’ve *killed* people for this, because…because I was trying to make a better world, and because they were part of the machine that kept hurting everyone. Even them! I don’t– how am I supposed to square that with *you?*” Her eyes burned, but she was not going to cry.

“Cass…” Tsuga knelt down and, after a brief hesitation to give her a chance to flinch away, rested one of her enormous hands on Cass’s shoulder. It was a comfortable weight, and she leaned into it. “There’s often moments like this early on in the domestication of a new xeno species. It can be hard to make the adjustment, and there’s always the urge to compare before to after. But, please listen, what you did in the wild does not have to reflect on who you are or who you have to be now.”

Cass sniffled and nodded. The Captain had said pretty much the same thing at the wardship meeting. “I just…after everything I did, I wanted it to mean something.”

“It did,” Tsuga said softly. “You were doing what you thought was best, not for you but for everyone — and you were a lot closer to the mark than most of your species,” she added, her smile returning. Cass could barely force herself to look at it, but she felt it nevertheless. She had no reply, but simply leaned into Tsuga’s touch, firm and unyielding. After a long moment, Tsuga spoke again. “I do have something for you that might cheer you up a little, if you’re interested.”

“Yeah?” Cass whispered, wiping at her eyes. She had absolutely not been crying. “Like what?” She watched as a vine slithered its way out of Tsuga’s body, a bud on its tip unfurling into a vibrant indigo-blue flower. “…what’s that?” she said, staring.

“When I filed that Notice of Intent to Domesticate, I realized that I was lacking a number of important grafts for terran care, so I went and had that taken care of. This flower’s pollen carries a Class-A xenodrug — wait,” she said, lifting her other hand to give Cass pause. “I know, I remember what happened the last time you were given a xenodrug from this Class, but this is a different one.”

“And you think it *won’t* make me want to crawl out of my skin?” Cass said, staring wide-eyed at the flower, almost terrified to breathe.

“Xenodrug classes are very broad, Cass. Class-A contains tens of thousands of xenodrugs that influence tactile sensory experience. We’re still early on in your species domestication, so only a few are really in use, but I spoke at length with Arvense and together we found one that, we think, will work better for you. It won’t amplify your sense of touch quite the way the one you tried before did. It will modulate it instead, and it should keep you from experiencing that kind of overload. And, just in case?” Another vine, this one needle-tipped, slithered out. “This is the counteragent. I also have a Class-E injector ready to go, in case you experience another panic attack.”

Cass’s gaze switched from the flower to the needle-tipped thorn, then back up to Tsuga. “You had all that put in…for me?”

“It wasn’t anything strenuous,” Tsuga said, laughing. The sound wrapped around Cass like a warm breeze. “Just a simple graft. And…well, if the committee voted for you to be immediately domesticated, I thought– I wanted to be able to give you something that might help you feel better about it. To not feel like it’s such a horrible thing. A gift. I didn’t bring it up before because I wanted it to be a surprise.”

Cass looked back at the flower. The interior was filled with silvery stamens, like little gilded strands of saffron. “I don’t–“ Words left her, and she could only seize her lip in frustration as her stomach flip-flopped. What was she supposed to feel? What was she supposed to *say?*

“If you don’t want it, I understand,” Tsuga said, slowly withdrawing the flower. The world seemed to slow to a crawl for Cass as conflicting thoughts did battle in her head. Tensions had been rising all day between two camps inside her, one the rigid leader and revolutionary her people needed, the other simply tired and hurting and lashing out. The guilt was overpowering on both sides — she was a failure, and she knew it. The only question was the response.

I’m a coward if I take the flower, she thought. It was a cheap way out, an easy lie, and besides, she didn’t deserve to feel good, not when she’d fucked up so bad, not when she still had so much work to do. There were statists to oppose, and the Affini to find a way to escape from, domestications to stop or reverse, and so many more equally critical tasks. All the weight in the world was collecting on her shoulders, and she would just have to grit her teeth and bear it, because no one else would — or at least, no one else would do it *right*.

But I can’t keep doing this. She’d borne this weight for decades, and what had it gotten her? Scars, lost friends, and precious little else. She couldn’t let herself believe that everything she’d ever done, every part of the fight, had been meaningless, but the specter of the thought loomed over her, ready to push its way into her mind at any moment. She didn’t know how to live with the pressure, the pain, the purpose — but even worse, she didn’t know how to live without it.

She wasn’t sure when she made the decision, or how she came to it, but she felt her hands dart out just before the blossom slipped out of reach. She felt them seize the vine and pull it back towards her, and she felt the velvety petals against her face as she pressed her nose into it and inhaled deeply. It came with a rich, paradoxically savory scent, somewhere between cinnamon and rosemary, maybe with a hint of smokiness. Just as quickly as the scent invaded her, so too did the rush of euphoria. The weight of her worries seemed so distant, so easy to lose track of. She took another deep breath before Tsuga pulled the vine away.

“I think that’s enough,” she said softly, her smile lighting up the world in a way the sunline never could. “Let’s see how that works for you.”

“Okay,” Cass said, her head already starting to swim. Tsuga was right — it wasn’t the same high at all. As her arms fell slowly back to her sides, as if through molasses, she felt as if she were leaving afterimages of herself behind. When she spoke, the words rippled through her insides like she were a pond and her voice a stone thrown into it. “Oh…wow,” she murmured, nearly losing her balance even with Tsuga’s hand against her.

“I think now is a good time to carry you,” she said, scooping Cass up into her arms. It wasn’t only the words that rippled, Cass realized, but *everything*. Every shift of Tsuga’s bark against her set her skin rippling. She clenched for just a moment, fearing that the sensation would become overwhelming, but it never did — it was as if she felt every touch with *all* of her, not merely the searing, stinging point of contact.

“Uh huh,” she mumbled, her head lolling back against Tsuga’s chest. “This… this is nice.” She licked her lips and shivered as if her whole body had been gently brushed with something soft and wet. “Aahh…”

“It seems to be working well,” Tsuga purred. “*Good*.” Tsuga’s voice thrummed through her, and she became an echo chamber for it. Her words rumbled up and down her body, rippling all the way and leaving Cass wrung out and loose as if she’d spent hours receiving full-body massage. She began to nuzzle gently into Tsuga, and thought part of her distantly wondered what in the world she was doing, the rest of her knew at a gut level that she wanted *more* — and Tsuga read the signs perfectly. A vine gently descended, and ever so cautiously began to stroke her hair. Cass let out a soft noise as she felt the tingling, rippling shimmer spread over her body.

“More,” she finally managed to whimper, and as if she’d been waiting for the opportunity, Tsuga indulged her. Vines slipped in from every direction almost the instant she spoke, coiling, squeezing, touching, stroking, caressing every inch of skin they could find. If each touch was a stone thrown into still waters, this was a torrential rainstorm, a thousand thousand pinpricks setting ripples against ripples. It was *so much*, it was *too much*, wasn’t it? Deep inside, Cass steeled herself against the pain she knew had to be coming, as she’d done so many times before…

…and nothing happened. Nothing, save the marvelous sensation of *being touched*. She let out a cry that would have humiliated her if she were sober, tears not of stress or panic or frustration but of *joy* streaming down her face. She was being touched in all the way she hated, all the ways that had always hurt — and now they didn’t hurt at all. She could feel the warm joy of contact with another, the swishing and rippling sensations of pleasure, but no pain, never pain. *Is this what it’s always like for others?* she wondered as Tsuga continued to play with her, the gentle rocking of her stride only barely registering. She didn’t know where she was or where she was going; she only knew she was in Tsuga’s arms, could see that warm smile and those beautiful, shining eyes, golden-green and enormous. *Is she*...

…*entrancing me again?* They had been outside a moment ago, hadn’t they? When had they gotten back to the hab, back to the couch, and when had Tsuga laid her out across her lap like this, face down and pressed against one strangely soft thigh. She felt Tsuga’s hand come down on her back, a long and slow stroking motion that left her in ecstasy. “Good girl,” Tsuga rumbled, and it affected her no less.

“Did… you…?” Her body was a wobbly mass of terran, a perfectly relaxed gelatin mold of a human being. It felt incredible, but it made it difficult to speak. She could scarcely get her mouth around the words, still swimming in the soft tides of euphoria.

“I thought you might not want to be moaning like that in public,” Tsuga said, stroking Cass’s hair with a vine. Cass bit her lip and shivered; the head-high had diminished somewhat, but the body high was still going strong and she was still well beyond sober. “So I put you under, just a little. I take it you like this?” Cass nodded, and the texture of Tsuga’s thighs was bliss. “Good, good. I don’t think you can know how happy that makes me.”

“Nnn…no… domes… domestica…”

“Don’t worry,” Tsuga said, laughing, and it was like Cass had been struck by lightning, her whole body seizing up for a split second. “I’m not trying to somehow trick you into domestication. It’s just a kindness for a friend.” Another long, slow stroke of her hand, and Cass let out a delighted whimper. “I’m here, and you’re safe, and that’s all that matters. Just enjoy yourself for now. If you feel like you want to sleep, sleep. We’ll talk about it in the morning, when you’re sober, okay?”

“O…kay.” Anything more was beyond her, but right now, that didn’t matter. Tsuga was here, and Cass was safe.

That was all that mattered.

Chapter End Notes

Yet another absurdly long chapter. Oof. But, y'know what? It does everything it needs to, and that's what matters.

'Til next time, y'all!

Chapter 26: Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

In which Nikolai finally gets what he ~~deserves~~ needs.
Content Warnings: Non-con drugging, Nikolai just being kind of a jackass in general

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something had gone wrong at some point, that much was certain, Nikolai knew. The operation had gotten off to a smashing success at first — they'd geared up, kludged together a few heavy-duty sprayers with the leaf blowers, figured out a harness to carry extra herbicide canisters, and had lain in wait for the ship to land, and land it did. So far so good.

Maybe splitting up was where it all started — but then, if they hadn't, Keeler would have kept bitching and maybe balked at the whole thing. Nikolai still felt it was beyond stupid to try to take the mine *and* the ship at once, but whatever — a rear guard wasn't the worst idea in the world if all the weeds were down there. Keeler went forward to the mine, Harriman with him. Maybe that was the mistake — it left Nikolai with McCloskey, and it was when he panicked in the ship's loading bay as they made their first big push that shit started going south.

Now, in fairness to the man, he'd been was staring down a twelve foot tall plant monster that sang at them as it advanced, bristling with vines and thorns and who knew what else lurking under its leaves, but nevertheless, his panic set off the other two, and they rushed back for the exit even as Nikolai made a controlled retreat, hosing down the plant monster (and McCloskey, by then trapped in the thing's vines) as he did so.

One down, he'd thought. The herbicide might take a minute or two to work, so a tactical retreat wasn't such a bad thing, as long as they could keep the ship on the ground. Sound strategy, that. But it wasn't just the one weed on the ship — more had started coming out of the woodwork (and who the hell put *wood* on a spaceship, anyway?!), and even though Nikolai filled the air with herbicide as he backed off down the ramp, he had to admit that things were not proceeding entirely as he'd envisioned.

Still. No plan of battle survives contact with the enemy, right? That was another Cass-ism he'd picked up. "Get to the mine!" he'd shouted to the others. "They'll funnel in and we'll get 'em!"

But that hadn't worked either — Harriman and Keeler were already down somehow, less than fifty meters into the mine's entrance, right at the junction where it split off into several tunnels. A handful of the monsters stood over them, dripping herbicide from every leaf. *At least they're dead*, he'd thought, but the shit was taking too long to kill the weeds! Only now did he consider that maybe hitting up a forestry station to try to find some chainsaws might have been a good idea.

He shouted something as he bolted past them — it might have been a "Come on!" to his fellows, or it might have been an expletive or two hurled at the weeds, he really couldn't remember — and hustled off down one of the narrower corridors. He knew he had to find something to slow them down long enough for the weedkiller to work. Some explosives maybe, that had worked on the one on the road! They'd let him into the armory, now that the weeds were here, wouldn't they?

Now there was a new problem, though: the protective suits and masks were not intended for running, and Nikolai was carting around a couple dozen kilos of extra weight beyond that in the form of herbicide tanks and the leaf-blower. He was starting to sweat already, and he could barely breathe. *Fuck it*. He pulled the mask back, the cool air of the mine a relief, though there was a funny smell to it, sickly sweet and distant.

"**sLoW dOwN, LiTtLe tErRaN~**" The booming, uncanny voice of the echoed down the corridor, making it hard to tell which direction it was coming from. Nikolai spun around and sprayed herbicide in all directions, coughing and nearly tripping over his own feet. Shit, where was he? Had he gotten turned around somewhere? Every wall in the damned place looked fucking identical and–

Oh. Fuck.

When he tried to sit up, his body jerked but wouldn't comply. The soft white ceiling above curved down to become the greenery-saturated walls, and he could see a sliding door at the end of what seemed like an unnecessarily large (but incredibly comfortable bed). Was he tied down?

"**aH, gOoD, yOu'Re cOnScIoUs aGaIn.**" An enormous shape seemed to detach itself from the wall, looming over him, its eyes half-hidden behind a curtain of vines, creepers, and moss. "**yOu rEaLlY DiD a nUmBeR oN yOuR LiTtLe lUnGs, bUdDy.**"

There was no way around it, no way to deny it — Nikolai was terrified. He'd been terrified before, the kind of spine-seizing icy fear that made it feel like your heart had stopped dead. The time he'd been captured during the prisoner revolt, and he was sure they were going to put a bullet in him right there in the breakroom, for example. This was worse, though. Those had been humans (prisoners, sure, definitely a lower order of life, but still ultimately human). This *thing*, with its snake-like vines drifting through the air above him, barely even looked as human as the other weeds tried to, more like a lump of walking swamp matter than anything.

“**sHhHh, dOn’T sCrEaM**,” it said, one of the vines slipping in and stabbing him in the neck. Something ice-cold seemed to spread out from there, and — wait, he hadn’t been screaming, had he? Even if he hadn’t, he couldn’t now that he tried. ”**yOuR lUnGs aRe dOiNg bEtTeR bUt yOuR tHrOat sTiLl hAs sOmE hEaLiNg tO dO. i’M aRvEnSe tElMaTeI, FiFtH bLoOm, hE/hIm, aNd i’M gOinG tO bE tAkIng cArE oF yOu uNtIL yOu’Re wElL eNoUgH fOr dOmEsTiCaTiOn.**”

Domestication?! The fuck does that mean?! Nikolai stared up at the monster, shivering and trying to shout, but only really succeeding in breathing out particularly forcefully.

“**i CaN sEe yOu’Re aN eNerGeTiC oNe**,” it said, letting out a noise that might have been a chuckle if it didn’t come from a twelve foot tall wall of dripping wet swamp slime. “**yOu’Ll bE oUt oF hErE aNd iN tHe ViNeS oF yOuR nEw oWnEr iN nO tImE.**”

He had to get out of here. He had to get out, he had to get out, he had to *get out*, but every time Nikolai tried to escape something held him down. Was it fear? Had he been drugged? Was he just tied down? He had to get out of here, he had to *get out*.

“**LeT’s sEe iF wE cAn’T bRiGhTeN yOuR mOoD a LiTtlE iN tHe mEaNtImE,**” it went on, lifting its hand. The needle of a nightmarish-looking syringe glistened dangerously. “**i aLWaYs sAy, lAuGhTeR iS tHe bEsT mEdiCine~**”

It had been an incredible evening, Cass remembered, and it had drifted slowly into an incredibly restful night. She hadn’t felt so relaxed, so at ease, so safe, so *loved* in years, maybe decades, maybe *ever*. Even now, the morning after, a bath and meal and a kilometer and a half of walking later, it was a touchstone for her, comfort following her through the day, tickling at the back of her mind as the memory of Tsuga’s touch and the million little ripples they set off echoed back and forth.

She could never let it happen again. It was *too good*, too powerful, and she knew that if she let it become a habit she would never be able to stop — she’d spend the rest of her life blissed out, unable to stick two thoughts together, unable to help her people rebuild in the aftermath of the Affini invasion, unable to find a way to liberate them from their (admittedly well-meaning) captors. That was going to be a long, slow, subtle fight, she knew. Risking that was a luxury she couldn’t afford.

“It may be attached to my body,” Tsuga had said earlier, before they left her hab, “but it’s *your* flower, and you can have it whenever you want.” The temptation to simply reach out and grab it as it had dangled there had almost won out, and that terrified Cass. She had to be stronger, or she was never going to escape this, let alone get her people out. The Captain’s request to come down to Arvense’s clinic had been a welcome distraction at the time, but Cass had still been stewing over things for the entire walk there. Not even the *Tillandia’s* open, airy interior, with the sunline shining warmly above and the curving greenery reaching up to become the sky, could keep her mind off of the problem that she would probably be struggling with in perpetuity going forward.

How do I get her to stop offering without being a complete asshole to her? That was the key problem — the flower *was*, in a vacuum, a wonderful gift, and one she very much

appreciated, and Tsuga had always been kind to her, always respected her, had actively fought to keep her independent. There was the purely utilitarian angle of not wanting to burn the only bridge she really had here, but beyond that she simply didn't want to hurt Tsuga. There had to be a way to thread the needle. She would just have to think long and hard about the problem, and the solution would reveal itself in time. Until then, she would just have to resist temptation.

But she ultimately didn't spend very long thinking about it. Cass was not even slightly prepared for what she saw when she and Tsuga walked into Arvense's clinic: Arvense, naturally, was there, and so was Andoa — the Captain had been the one who had asked her to come down to the clinic, no shock that e was there. What stopped Cass in her steps and made her stare was the woman next to Andoa, leaning into eir leg with a bright green collar around her neck.

"Nell?" Her head jerked up suddenly, and for a brief moment she met Cass's eyes before she looked away, her face turning a brilliant red.

"Ah, good, you're here," Andoa said, grinning down at Cass. "I hope I'm not imposing, asking you down here?"

"No," Cass said, unable to take her eyes away from Nell. She was wearing some kind of lightweight bodysuit, pale, diaphanous, woven from something like cotton, not quite skin-tight but still leaving little to the imagination.

"…ah," e said, glancing down at Nell. "I see. Why don't we let you two catch up before we take you in, hmm?"

"I think that might be a good idea," Tsuga said. "If nothing else, I do have good news about the aerosolized prokimatiesthezine compound."

"Oh, marvelous!" Arvense said cheerfully. "Do tell, do tell!"

"Go on, sweetie, go see your friend," Andoa added as e stepped away, giving Nell a gentle push towards Cass with one enormous mossy hand, Nell resisted, but only a little, and soon she and Cass were standing alone as the three Affini had an extended conversation in their own language on the other side of the room. Nell still couldn't meet Cass's gaze.

"So…this is new," Cass finally said. "You lost?"

Nell shook her head and hugged herself. "I won. I beat the timer. But…it turns out that wasn't the game after all."

"Well, what *was*? Why the hell are you wearing that? The last time I saw you, you were talking up your big plans to leverage the Captain, so why the hell are you following em around with a *collar* on?"

"Because…" Nell bit her lip and let out a sigh. "Because I'm eir floret," she said quietly. "E, uhm… e let me go, like e said e would. And I tried to leave, I really, really did! But…I couldn't." She rubbed at her eyes and let out a mumbled, "I'm sorry."

"… no," Cass said, stepping forward and hugging Nell. "You fight as long as you can, and if you hit your limit, know it and say it. That's always been the rule." She kept her face as still as she could, but she felt her heart sinking. *I failed her too*, she thought. *It's all I'm good at*. The best she could do now was ease Nell's guilt. She was more than used to feeling guilt, and taking on Nell's and adding it to her own wouldn't change things much.

"…stars, I should apologize to McCracken," she mumbled into Cass's shoulder.

"She's too high to appreciate it right now, so you might have to wait."

"…she?" Nell looked up and laughed softly. "Wow, I am out of the loop. Fuck. I'm sorry, I just…she figured it out long before I did, you know?"

"…that you want this?" Cass raised an eyebrow, fixed her gaze just above Nell's eyebrows. She could feel Nell's stare in her peripheral vision, like a gravitational well she had to fight against.

"I know how it sounds, but *yes*. I mean, think about it, Cass — they're the *perfect vanguard*. They're the end of capital not just for us but for everyone, *everywhere*! It may not perfectly line up with with the dialectic, but shit, even Einstein didn't figure out strange matter physics, did he?"

"And you're just…okay with being a pet?"

"If I'm *eir* pet, yeah." There wasn't a trace of doubt in her voice, in the aura of her eyes, in her posture. If anything, she seemed to gain a paradoxical strength from confirming her submission. Cass couldn't understand it, couldn't get her head around how Nell, one of the most fiery and animated fighters she'd ever known, who could be relied upon to argue literally everything into the ground if it deviated even slightly from Marxist dogma, could just give in like this.

But she had. And there was nothing she could do about it. "Okay," she said. "It's your decision."

Nell snorted and smiled up at Cass. "Anarchist bullshit. But seriously…thank you for understanding."

"I *don't* understand it," Cass said firmly, "but it's not my decision. I just– I want to make sure it's *yours*, that's all. With them, it can be hard to tell."

"Well, for what it's worth, my Captain prides emself on *not* doing it that way," Nell said, grinning, "so yeah. It's all me. I'm apparently the perverted plantfucker your parents warned you about."

"…right." She never *had* talked about her past with Nell. It wasn't some kind of jab, just an unfortunate turn of phrase. "So why *are* we here?" That wasn't the only reason she changed the subject: Cass did *not* want to get into the details of Nell's relationship with the Captain. She was having enough trouble keeping her mind off of the details concerning herself and Tsuga, and more details would probably not be helpful.

“Oh, that. They brought Nikolai in a couple of days ago,” Nell said, sighing and shaking her head. “Cass, that fuckwit screwed everything up, and I’m sorry I covered for his ass for so long.”

“Don’t worry about it. I take it he’s here?” She nodded towards the back of Arvense’s clinic.

Nell nodded. “Surprise, surprise, he’s not adjusting well, and Arvense asked the Captain to bring me to help calm him down, and…look, I just don’t want to go in there alone. Especially not after the way we left things off. I may have dumped his ass in a really public way.”

“I heard a little about that from Raeburn. Who’s doing much better, by the way.”

“Yeah?” Her eyes brightened a little. “Good. I’m glad to hear that. People are adjusting to the ship?”

“They’re trying to put together a centralized government-in-exile and it’s all the two of us can do to dig in our heels to keep you statists from ruining everything,” she said in a lighthearted tone, giving Nell a smile that she didn’t really feel.

“Fucking anarchist bullshit.” She grinned and gave Cass a clap on the shoulder, and for once Cass was grateful for the shivering, uncomfortable feeling it caused — it was like a bucket of cold water to the face, a reminder that she could endure that kind of touch without xenodrugs in her system. “Come on, let’s go and get this over with.”

“I fucking *knew* you were a wormhead.” Nikolai was pressed into the corner of the room, between the wall and the bed, glaring daggers at Nell. “Ever since Twin Creeks I fucking *knew* you were working for them!”

“One, fuck you, I *still* don’t have an implant,” Nell spat, her shoulders hunching in tightly coiled fury, “and two, don’t call florets wormheads, you fucking prick!”

“You sabotaged *everything*, we lost because of *you!*”

“Nikolai, shut up,” Cass said calmly. It was, on some level, impressive how rapidly Nell and Nikolai could turn literally anything into a screaming argument, but she wasn’t in the mood for it.

“You weren’t there, she–“

“Shut. Up.” She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and actually met his eye, giving him every ounce of Commanding Officer Stare she could muster, and it worked — he paused mid-syllable as if she’d grabbed him by the throat. “Better.”

“Fucking *dipshit*,” Nell growled, “I can’t *believe* you actually tried to–“

“You shut up too, Nell. Yelling isn’t going to accomplish anything,” Cass said, sighing and shaking her head. She’d had a front row seat to several of these fights before, and while they might not be a couple anymore they hadn’t missed a step in the long, interminable, angry dance yet. Hopefully, she could head it off here.

“At least I *tried*,” Nikolai grumbled. “Instead of just fucking running away like cowards!”

“I *told* her to do that,” Cass said, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Fighting them is a meaningless and pointless gesture, Nikolai, they’re too advanced for simple tactics like that.”

“Bullshit, I got at least three or four of them before I went down!” he insisted, drawing himself up a few inches and puffing his chest out.

“Oh, with the *herbicide?*” Nell said, rolling her eyes. “You unbelievable fucking–“

“Nikolai,” Cass said, interrupting Nell, “herbicides are chemically tailored for specific applications.”

“Yeah, killing plants, I *know*, I’m not–“

“They kill *specific* plants,” Cass said. She could feel a headache beginning to form right behind her left eye, the Am-I-Seriously-Having-To-Do-This headache she was intimately familiar with. “If they killed plants indiscriminately, they would be *defoliants*, not *herbicides*, and spraying them on the crops we were trying to grow on Solstice would be a pretty bad idea, wouldn’t it?”

She watched the realization slowly come together in Nikolai’s eyes, uncomfortable though it was. “You mean…you don’t think that I–“ He seemed to deflate, all the bluster and ego leaking slowly out of him.

“I know for a *fact* you didn’t kill any of them, asshole,” Nell growled. “They were more worried about *you*, and the other people in the mine who didn’t have fucking respirators on when you pumped the air full of toxic fucking fumes! What the hell were you thinking? I told you back at Twin Creeks it wouldn’t fucking work. And what were you even going to *do* after you poisoned yourself and everyone else around you?”

“…w-well, we were gonna take the ship,” he muttered, looking away, at the wall, at the ground, anywhere but at Nell and Cass.

“Oh, you were going to *take the ship*. Great. Brilliant. With a couple barrels of herbicide and some leaf blowers, you were going to take a *nine kilometer ship*.”

“Well, *you* sure the fuck weren’t doing anything to help!” Nikolai retorted, trying to build up a bit of his lost confidence.

“If I thought that a plan like that would work,” Cass said evenly before Nell could butt back in, “don’t you think I’d have gone with it instead of what we tried? Or do you think *I’m* a coward?”

“Wh– I mean– *no*, but–“ He sputtered, lost for words. She could see the fear in his eyes. *Good*, she thought. Men like him were more predictable when they feared you.

“If there was even the slightest chance that fighting would do any good, that it might help us stay free, do you think I’d hesitate even for a second?” She gave him the Commanding Officer Stare again. “I declared war on the entire Accord when I was younger than you are

now, Nikolai. I'm not afraid of doing what needs to be done. But I'm also not afraid to acknowledge when a tool no longer functions. We won't win against them in a stand-up fight, not when the entire Cosmic Navy couldn't stop them."

"Bullshit!" he said, though the fear was curdling into doubt in his voice. "That's just propaganda, the war can't be *over*, we–"

"Nikolai, you are standing on a *nine-kilometer starship*. You can *stand* because the entire thing is spinning to create artificial gravity. This ship is so large it has parks, trees, *forests*. They *move* this ship without crumpling it, or shattering it into a million pieces. They can move it through *hyperspace*. Do you have any idea how much power that requires, the material engineering necessary to make that possible?"

"And this isn't even one of their bigger ships," Nell added. "It's just a medium fleet tender. This whole ship is just where they put extra florets other ships don't have room for during pacification campaigns!"

"But–"

"Do you remember how propaganda used to show the Rinans?" Cass said. "Or was that before your time? I haven't watched vids for about twenty years, so I don't know if they still show them, but I bet they do. The way they used to cast them as primitives who could scarcely govern themselves, who didn't really understand the technology they were building, who *needed* us to run things for them?" Even decades later, the loathsome garbage was still seared into her mind, still made her gut churn. *The things we did to those poor people…and the things the Accord did to my mother and so many others for daring to say it was wrong*. "To the Affini, comparatively, we're even less developed than that propaganda cast the Rinans as, and we could no more fight them off than the Rinans could protect themselves from us."

Nikolai had no response to that. He only shivered and stared at Cass. She forced herself to hold his gaze, to make it entirely clear to him that she wasn't bullshitting. "You mean…" His voice cracked, and he coughed, then started again. "You mean we never stood a chance?"

"I mean exactly that," Cass said softly, almost apologetically.

"But…c'mon, I mean… we're *terrans*," he said. His face assumed the most pitiful expression Cass had ever seen. "We…we're the most advanced…we're supposed to…" He swallowed heavily as he wrestled with reality's slow, relentless dawn.

"There's nothing you could have done to change what's happened," she went on. "Except *not fight back*. There might be a way to get free after proving we can coexist, but that's going to be a long way off if it's even possible." She shrugged. "I'm not certain there's anything I can do to keep you out of their hands. I barely escaped domestication, and I never resorted to chemical warfare."

"Oh, it's not as bad as all that." Arvense's cheerful voice came from the entryway, where the enormous shaggy Affini was poking his trunk into the room, and the minute he spoke Nikolai went white as a sheet. "Sorry to interrupt, but this little guy needs a top-up."

“You stay the fuck away from me!” Nikolai shrieked, cowering into the corner. “Do something!” he added, casting a desperate, fearful glance at Cass.

And she couldn’t ignore it. He might be an arrogant, self-deluding prick who had abused her good nature and willingness to forgive those who tried to make amends, but he was still one of her people. “Hold on, Arvense, what are you giving him?”

“Oh, nothing serious,” he said, coming around the bed, an elegantly tapering needle held in one hand. “Just a bit of Class-E, Class-D, and a few other subtle little goodies. It’s a little cocktail I’ve been working on specifically for your species, actually.”

“No! Fuck off! Not again!” Nikolai was desperately pressing himself against the wall, as if trying to push his way through it to escape, but Arvense’s vines were already around him, far too strong for Nikolai to escape from.

“He really doesn’t seem to want it,” Cass said. There wasn’t much beyond this she *could* do, she knew, but she owed Nikolai that much.

“He always says that until it’s in his system,” Arvense said, chuckling as he lifted Nikolai screaming off the ground. “I’m thinking of calling it The Arvense Special. Do you think that’s too egotistical? Now hold still, little guy.” He was in an out in a flash — Cass almost didn’t see the needle move — and Nikolai quieted down just as quickly.

“Ohhh shit no,” he murmured in a hazy voice as Arvense gently set him down on the bed.

“See? Not so bad, was it? He does this every time,” he added in an aside to Cass and Nell. “Especially the evening doses, for some reason. Even if he wasn’t being domesticated for being a feralist who poses a significant risk to himself and others, he’d have to be domesticated for resisting a rest!”

“Arvense, that’s terrible,” Cass said, but she couldn’t stop herself from grinning. Even Nikolai chuckled, a low noise that slowly grew until it was a laugh. He clutched at his sides, rocking back and forth as he laughed himself silly at Arvense’s pun.

“Well, he certainly seems to like it,” Arvense said, clearly pleased. “And he’s the patient. And *what* a laugh he’s got! I could listen to it for hours…”

“It’s definitely his best feature,” Nell said, her tone only a little acid.

“So it’s a sure thing, then? His being domesticated?” Cass knew the answer, but she couldn’t *not* push, *not* fight back.

“Very much so,” Arvense said, not taking his eyes from Nikolai as he lost himself in a fit of laughter.

“He’ll be alright,” Nell said quietly. “It’s not like they’re gonna scoop his brain out with a spoon or something. They’re just gonna make him be less of an asshole.”

“Yes, but–“ She paused, shook her head. “Alright. Just promise me you’ll take care of him,” Cass said to Arvense. “I know there’s no way for me to talk you down from it, but… make

sure he's okay." Her shoulders tightened painfully. *Is it cowardice or accepting that I've lost?* "Be good to him. Make sure he's happy, at least."

"Cass, please," Arvense said as he ruffled Nikolai's hair. He was still laughing uncontrollably, rolling back and forth on the bed, his movements languid and carefree. He reminded Cass of Leah in no small way like this. It was comforting and disquieting all at once. "I'm an Affini. Surely by now you know that's what we do best."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was far more of a wrestling match than I thought it would be, but it's done, and now I can move on and not have to think about writing from Nikolai's perspective anymore.

THREE CHAPTERS REMAIN. (unless there's more idk)

Chapter 27: Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

In which a decision or two is made.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cass let out a sigh as she stepped out of the communal meeting space. The Affini had some way of making the inside of a building feel as fresh and airy as the outside, so she knew the sense of a breeze and comfort as she did so was purely psychosomatic, but feel it she did. Six straight hours of arguments over amendments, all chipping away at the central issue of Elysian autonomy, would do that to a person.

“Good job in there today,” Raeburn said, following her out and giving her a gentle shoulder-check. “Damn glad to have you back.” She was looking even better than she had the first time Cass had seen her, and she was putting on weight again. The rough years on Solstice still showed in her crow’s-feet, grey-white hair, and lined forehead, but who knew? Maybe, in time, that would all fall away too. With the Affini, it was anyone’s guess.

“Thanks. Feels good to be back in the saddle.” It didn’t — it was stressful and she was already sick of banging her heads against the statist wall — but she wasn’t going to undermine Raeburn’s morale by admitting it. “I can’t believe they’re still fighting us over this. It was one thing when it was just us on Solstice, but considering no one is going to be strictly autonomous for a long while, it feels awfully silly of them to insist on centralization.”

“And who the hell thinks a state where a third of the people ostensibly in it don’t want to be is going to work?” Raeburn shook her head. “They got along just fine under a confederal model before, don’t see why it’s such a problem now.”

“Still too statist for me, but I’d take it over this,” Cass grumbled. This round of negotiations was beginning to look a lot like the last one, the one that had ended in tens of thousands of deaths and three years of winter. At least this time, she was fairly certain that wasn’t in the cards.

“My little radical,” Raeburn said, grinning. “And yet somehow you keep getting put in charge.”

“I don’t *want* to be in charge. I don’t want *anyone* to be in charge. We just keep getting stuck in situations where we need someone to be able to make snap judgements. Or where we need to present a unified front against imperialism, even if it’s soft and cuddly plant imperialism.”

“It’s definitely not where I saw the revolution going,” Raeburn admitted. “Well, we’ll muddle through. We always do. We’ll get this autonomy thing settled, we’ll hunker down and wait out the Affini, and then we’ll finally get started on making this shit work.”

Cass nodded, but she wasn’t so optimistic — statists, and the hardcore Leninist contingent now ably represented by the weedy but focused Mycek in particular, were loath to allow any deviation from a centrally-controlled vanguardist core. *Liberalism, socialism, Bolshevism; they are three brothers who go their different ways to grab power over man.* The lesson of the Makhnovshchina was never far from her mind of late, as it had been the day of the Pillar of Fire — coexistence with statists wasn’t an option. Sooner or later, they’d turn on you.

Ironically, the only thing keeping them from doing so was the Affini themselves. Neither of them had any leverage, but Cass felt as though no one was willing to acknowledge it at the negotiating table. They had *lost*. The revolution was irretrievably fucked. The Affini weren’t going anywhere. The best they could do would be to keep the spirit of revolution alive against the vain hope that an empire that had endured for far longer than settled human civilization would someday recede and collapse — that someday, in the distant geological future, whatever was left of humanity after the Affini had their way with them would remember what it was to be free.

Cass had always known she would probably never live to see a truly free world. That was the lot any revolutionary accepted when they took up arms in the name of justice. But to stand there, staring up at the sunline and the curving sky, and to know that even her distant descendents might not know that world was a heartbreaking weight. *I fucked up. I don’t know how I could have* not *fucked up, but I fucked up.*

“Cass?” She paused, looked down at Raeburn, who was looking at her concerned. “You okay? You just zoned out for a solid minute and a half.”

“…thinking, sorry,” she said, looking back up at the sky.

“Ahhh. Say no more. Want some alone time?” Raeburn had seen this all before, before the revolution, during it, and after it ever so briefly. She had seen it on and off the job, in the cold outside and in the warmth of a shared bed. Few people really *got* Cass, but Raeburn had always been one of them.

“…maybe.”

“Which means yes,” Raeburn said, chuckling. “Alright. Take care of yourself, okay?” Cass nodded, listened to her go, and let out the breath she’d been holding. At least now she didn’t have to maintain the facade of the great revolutionary, the lie that she could save the day, the

absolutely perfidious bullshit that she had some kind of a plan like she always had. Now she could allow herself to feel the weight on her, and feel how much it ached.

Everything she had done was pointless. Everything she was doing in the ceaseless meetings, debates, and negotiations was pointless. Nothing she did would ever matter, because the Affini would simply do whatever they wanted regardless, and nothing the self-styled government-in-exile of Solstice said or did would have even the slightest influence on events. She'd have better luck making change by convincing Tsuga of something and having her talk to the Captain on her behalf — and even Tsuga was committed to the concept of domestication, of stripping freedom from humanity in the name of safety and comfort.

What was left to her save a life of trying to stay one step ahead of that? What was the purpose of meaningless jockeying over autonomy when the Affini would never allow her or anyone else to be truly free in the first place? *Was this Your plan?* she half-thought, half-prayed. *And if so, why dangle hope in front of us only to take it away in the end?*

There was another, more prosaic question as well: *When did the sunline get so dim?* It was dark enough now she could see right past it to the part of the ring opposite. Funny — when she'd first gotten here, that view had made her sick to her stomach, and now she was able to wrap her head (or, more specifically, her inner ear) around it just fine. The woods creaked gently in the artificial breeze around her, and she almost didn't notice when one of the trees stepped out and approached her.

"There you are," Tsuga said, kneeling down next to her. "I've been sending you messages. Did you leave your tablet somewhere?"

"….hmm?" Cass glanced at Tsuga, remembered the little mini-tablet in the pocket of her jacket, and pulled it out. Sure enough, she'd missed almost half a dozen messages from Tsuga, not to mention a few others as well. "…sorry. Thinking."

"Thinking?" She held one hand out behind Cass's back, and she leaned gratefully back into it. The pressure was comforting, warm, undemanding. "About what?"

"This. Everything." She let out a sigh and let her eyes slip closed. There was a burning behind them, but she forced it back out of habit. No matter that no one was watching that cared, she couldn't shed tears. Not now.

"I take it you didn't have a particularly productive day at your meeting?"

"Hard to have a productive day when everything about it–" She stopped, shook her head. "No. Never mind."

"Tell me." Her voice was gentle, filling in the gaps in the soft sounds of the ship's woods.

And it was all she needed to hear — Cass found the words ready to spill out of her. It was easier, somehow, to vent to this massive alien plant than it was to friends and comrades. "I just don't know how to live anymore. Everything I prepared myself for is gone. The only fight left is one I can't win." *Fight back*, the voice in the back of her head demanded. *Don't you dare lie down on the job. Fight back!*

“And you feel the need to fight?” Tsuga’s voice was warm, kind, comforting — she asked, even though she clearly knew the answer.

“I know I can’t win,” Cass whispered, “but I can’t stop fighting either. I’ve been fighting since I was old enough to even know about the fight. I’ve defined my entire life according to that struggle.”

Tsuga was silent for a moment. “And if I told you that you no longer *needed* to struggle?”

“I can’t just *stop fighting*. It’s not something I know how to do. And–” Cass swallowed, choking back the beginnings of tears, sucking down a long sniffling breath. “I don’t know anything outside of it. I don’t know who I’d be without it. Not anymore.”

“Then we’ll find out together,” Tsuga said gently, applying just a bit more force to Cass’s back — not enough to overbalance her, but enough to say “I’m here.” It was enough to rip a few tears from Cass. “No matter what, I will be here to help you discover yourself, and I will delight in meeting whoever you turn out to be.”

“I can’t,” Cass hissed, turning to look up at Tsuga, at her big blue eyes shining in the dim light of shipboard evening. “I don’t– I feel like I’m clinging to the edge of a cliff, and you’re telling me to let go!”

Something in her eyes flickered, and Cass felt a soft rumble somewhere below her range of hearing. “If I am asking you to let go,” Tsuga said quietly, “please trust that I will always be there to catch you. You don’t have to do this alone. You never did, and you never will.”

The dam burst inside her heart, and Cass found herself being scooped up into Tsuga’s arms as she began to sob. Distantly, part of her hoped that there weren’t any terrans around to see it — what a disaster that’d be. Tsuga rocked her gently as she wept, and as her mind separated into two camps, diametrically opposed.

What the fuck are you doing? one cried. *Stop crying, you coward! You’re playing right into their hands! There’s always a way to fight back, so fight back! You didn’t just lie down and die for the Accord, why would you do it for the Affini?*

But there’s no point, the other responded. *Fighting them is a pointless, purposeless act. If you fight, you’ll just end up like Nikolai, like Nell, like Aletheia. Nothing will be accomplished, nothing gained. Everything has been for nothing*.

A third voice joined the fray: “Shhh, shhh, I’m here,” Tsuga whispered. “It’s alright. You’re safe. I’m here.” And somehow, that voice was the stronger, her inner turmoil receding as she listened to the gentle rumblings inside Tsuga, to the melodic shifting of her voice. She sucked up a sniffling breath and clutched at Tsuga’s vines, warm and firm. “Would you like something to help you calm down? Nothing heavy, just a little Class-E.” A vine, its tip a slowly unfurling flower, drifted into view. “One breath, in and out, without holding it. That should take the edge off.”

Cass stared up at the flower for a long moment, blinking away her tears. *Are you out of your mind?!* she demanded of herself, both camps coming together at last to agree on this one

thing. *The last thing you need right now is to be drugged!* But again, something spoke louder than her mind, drowned out its objections. It was the ache in her heart that reached out and took the flower, pressed it to her face, and pulled in a deep breath. Even before she exhaled she could feel the lightness settling throughout her body, the gentle waves of her feelings lapping at her as she receded away from them. “Aaah…”

“Exhale, now,” Tsuga said, her vines tightening and forcing the breath from Cass as she withdrew the flower. “And in. Good girl. Just relax. I’m right here.”

“Uh-huh,” Cass murmured, her head lolling against Tsuga’s chest, her eyelids growing heavy. Somehow, she was getting used to the floaty feeling that Class-E gave her — it didn’t feel quite so wrong as it did in the wake of her panic attack or the meltdown. Here in Tsuga’s arms, all she felt was comfort, with every part of her body and mind.

“You look like you could use a good meal and a nap,” Tsuga said, rising to her feet. Cass felt the motion as if a whirlwind were carrying her off into the sky. “Let’s get you home, shall we?”

“You’re too good to me.” She managed to force her eyes open, turned her head to look up at Tsuga. *Why is she so damned pretty?*

“No such thing,” Tsuga said. “You deserve all this and more.” She set off, the motion of her stride like a boat at sea, rolling back and forth slowly, easily. All the stress and strain had fallen away, and her heart was light as a feather. The sunline swung back and forth above, dimming slowly as night set in aboard the *Tillandsia*, and Cass could only just manage to keep her eyes tracking it.

A girl could get used to this, she thought, and for the first time nothing inside her warned against it.

It was chilly, still, even as summer began to take hold. The snow might have melted off in the lowlands, but up here in the hills it still hid in shadowy patches. The air was thick with the cloying scent of false oak, and years of deadfall crunched under Cass’s feet as she walked through the woods.

Not much farther now. She stopped, waited for silence to fall, then whistled out a sharp call, a recognition signal common to Bulwark. She listened, then made the call again. This time, the response came, a single whistle, and Cass immediately gave the countersignal, two descending tones. She pressed on in the general direction of the whistle she’d heard, though if her quarry was playing by the rulebook Cass had taught her, she’d have changed position.

It gratified her no small amount that she had — she heard the snap of a twig to her left and froze. There, hidden in a dugout between two false oaks, was a disheveled-looking Trish, a carbine braced against her shoulder, staring down the barrel at her. “…Cass?” she said, and Cass could tell from her voice that she didn’t quite believe what she was seeing.

“Hi Trish,” she said, smiling and turning her head, lifting her hands out of her pockets slowly. “Good to see you.” In a heartbeat, she had a pair of arms around her, squeezing tight, and

Cass returned the hug. She clearly needed it. “Just you out here?”

“Just me,” she said, nodding and releasing Cass. “Holy shit. Okay, come on, we’ve got to get back to the cave. If we stay out too long, not even the tree cover will hide us.”

“Lead the way,” Cass said, and Trish set off without delay. Cass followed her through the woods, down a ravine, and up the side of a stream that was swollen with glacial runoff. The ravine eventually tightened, and they were forced to pick their way through the stream itself, hopping from rock to rock, until they came to the mouth of a cave that was little more than a crevasse.

“In here,” Trish said, squeezing in. When Cass followed, she found a wide chamber behind it, bitterly cold but relatively dry, and a tunnel leading further back into the hillside — Cass could see a tent pitched there, and a camp that had clearly been in use for some time. “Home sweet home,” she added, taking a seat on a camp stool. “Sorry I don’t have much to offer. I only run the stove in the afternoons, when the temperature hits peak.”

“Smart,” Cass said, nodding and taking a seat on a convenient stone. It was what she would have done. *With a little bit better supply line, some more thermal masking, this could be a new beginning*, the part of her that still thought in terms of tactics and logistics in the revolution’s name thought. *I wonder how many we could hold here without the heat bloom giving us away?* “What’s your plan from here?”

“Shit, I don’t know,” Trish muttered. She wasn’t quite gaunt, but she was getting there, thinner than Cass remembered her. “I’m pretty sure they’ve got half the people in the valley at this point, maybe more. I see their ships going up and down all the time. Just surviving for now, I guess. What about you, what are you doing here? How’d you get away from them?”

Well, that was Trish — she didn’t waste time. Best to follow her lead and just tear the bandage off. Cass took a deep breath and said, “I didn’t. They asked me to come talk to you.”

For a moment, Trish stared, uncomprehending — then, a darker look came over her. “Fuck,” she hissed. “I should have checked the back of your neck. I always thought Nikolai was full of shit about the whole wormhead thing.”

“Don’t call them wormheads,” Cass said. “It’s not a worm, anyway, it’s a kind of plant, and in any case I don’t have one. You can look, if you like.” She reached up and pulled her hair away from her neck.

Trish hesitated, then shook her head. “No, I trust you. Probably stupid of me, but I trust you. Why’d you go turncoat, then?”

“I didn’t,” Cass said. “We just lost, that’s all.” It galled her to say it, and though it was true, there was still a part of her looking for a way out, a way to fight back. There had to be a way, there was *always* a way.

“What do you mean, *we lost?* I’m here, and there’s others. The plan’s still working!”

“It’s not. It never did. It never would have. We lost the moment they arrived. It just took me until now to realize it, and in the meantime I put you and a lot of others through a lot of pointless suffering. I’m sorry.” *Fight back, you fucking coward!*

“No, no, no,” Trish said, standing up and pacing around anxiously before wheeling angrily to face her. “You don’t get to just say *we lost* and *I’m sorry*, Cass, you need to explain this shit to me! You’re coming down here and saying, give up, let the plant aliens abduct you and melt your brain and use you for whatever the fuck comes next!”

“They don’t– look, all they want is to take care of us,” Cass said. “Just like they said when they first arrived, though honestly, for a species that’s been at this for as long as they have, they can be really dreadful about explaining what they mean themselves. Maybe it’s an ideological blind spot, maybe it’s part of the game to them, I don’t know.”

“Fascinating, but not really an explanation,” Trish said, crossing her arms and glaring.

“The point is, they want us to take care of us, individually as florets and collectively as a species. It’s their primary motivation, and I thought I could use that. I thought I could use *us* as leverage, and that’s why I called for Case Dandelion. The more effort and time they had to spent on rooting us out, they less they’d have to spend finding and helping *other* sophonts. Do you follow?”

She was silent for a moment. “Yeah, that makes sense, I guess,” she admitted. “So why give up?”

“I underestimated them, both their capabilities and their willingness to expend an absurd amount of effort on a relatively small number of people. To put it in perspective, Tsuga told me that once, millions of Affini spent over a decade trying to save less than a hundred individuals from extinction — and when they couldn’t, they spent another decade and a half resurrecting the species using cloning.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“I’ve no reason to disbelieve it,” Cass said, meeting Trish’s eyes and holding her gaze there. “They mean to take care of us, and they mean to do it whether we want to or not, and they’ll expend whatever effort is necessary to do so, no matter how onerous or seemingly wasted it might be.” What had seemed like a path out of the trap had, in fact, been the trap itself — humiliating and frustrating that she hadn’t seen it. “If there was just one of us down here, *just one*, I think we’d see the exact same degree of effort on their part to find them.”

“…fuck,” Trish whispered. Cass could see the anger and frustration turn to a fearful acceptance on her face. She’d had years to learn. “No leverage, then?”

“No leverage,” Cass said, shaking her head. “And if there’s a way out of it, I can’t see it. Believe me, nothing would make me happier than you and I bolting, finding somewhere they haven’t sniffed you out, and putting together some kind of resistance, but it wouldn’t change anything.” It made her sick to say it, sick to give in, but seeing how Trish was living had only hardened her resolve. Bulwark had been bad enough, the last thing Cass would do was make her endure more of this.

“Wait, they know I’ve been camped here?” Trish said, her eyes going wide. “Why didn’t they come in and get me?”

“They know you’re a risk-taker from the way you drove out of Twin Creeks, and they were afraid you might have had a grenade or two, and that they wouldn’t be able to get to you or knock you out before you pulled the pin. If one of those went off in here, you’d never survive. And you’ve apparently been very good about hunkering down anytime one of their ships is even remotely nearby — good opsec,” she added, smiling. “They had some plans for how to get you that mostly involved getting the most cold-adapted Affini they could find to sit down out there and wait you out.”

“Or send you in, apparently.”

“Oh, no, I had to fight them on that,” Cass said. “They were so afraid you were going to shoot me. But I thought you might prefer this, considering that if they try to take you, I *know* you’ll fight back, and they’ll probably domesticate you for it.”

“Fuck that,” Trish hissed, shivering both from the chill of the cave and and her own disquiet. “Fuck that entirely, they don’t get to just… *decide* that!”

“Unfortunately, they do,” Cass said, “because we can’t stop them. The best we can do is try to ride it out, and maybe find a way to live without them around afterwards.” She wasn’t confident about that — the Affini were busybodies and pests, totally unwilling to not stick their noses or vines or whatever into everything — but she had to hold out hope, both for Trish and for herself. “Everyone they’ve captured are putting together a government in exile aboard the ship. Issue demands, state positions, that sort of thing. I don’t know how much they’ll respect it, but it’s something.”

“A government in exile, huh? And you’re, what, throwing big cartoon bombs into the middle of it, I bet?” Trish said, snickering a little despite everything.

“Something like that,” Cass said. It was good to see a smile on Trish’s face. “Hoping against hope that when we’re rid of them — if we *can* be rid of them — we won’t recapitulate the same statist nightmare we fought to overthrow.”

Trish laughed. “Yep, you’re definitely Cass and not some weird alien plant clone.”

Cass hadn’t even considered weird alien plant clones as a possibility, and for a brief moment tried to reevaluate her strategy in light of the idea. Affini would never send florets into a dangerous situation, so she’d dismissed the idea of infiltration outright almost as soon as she’d learned that, but a wholly original duplicate? Well, if they’d balked at Cass coming to talk Trish down, they likely wouldn’t be willing to create life just for that purpose (and anyway, if they *could*, they wouldn’t need to domesticate the universe). But, if they could somehow generate a plant clone that was a philosophical zombie, that acted and talked and behaved like the original but was totally non-self-aware, then *maybe* they’d be willing to–

“Cass? Hello?” Trish was leaning in close. “You okay? You tuned out hardcore, there.”

“S-sorry,” Cass said, shaking her head to clear it. She filed the thought away for another time — it probably wouldn’t be useful, anyway, she reminded herself. A very loud part of her continued to demand immediate investigation of the possibility, but she pointedly ignored it, just as she ignored it when it demanded that she and Trish run and hide and rebuild a resistance against the Affini.

That voice had been louder and more insistent than ever after Tsuga had drugged her out of a panic attack a few days before, and while she’d avoided any further repeats she’d been on edge ever since. She remembered how still and peaceful she’d felt on the Class-E, and how easily she’d accepted another hit of the Class-A flower Tsuga had offered her later in the evening. She remembered how wonderful it felt to be held, touched, stroked, to have her body ensnared in half a dozen coiling, constricting vines that wound her in a close, comfortable embrace. It felt good. It felt *right*. For the first time in a long time Cass had felt like she belonged where she was. Now, in the sober light of day, Cass felt a terrible horror knowing how close she had come to giving up everything. If Tsuga had asked her to be her floret when she was like that, she might well have said yes.

Now more than ever, she had to be careful. One slip and she might be back on the xenodrugs, and then who knew what she might agree to — and without her, who knew what would happen to her people? “Just thinking,” she finally said, looking back up at Trish. “Strategy. How to persist and resist without fighting, without any means of retaliation, without leverage. It’s all about strength of will, about not giving in. They’ll offer you everything you could ever want, and you have to be strong enough to say no.”

“Oh, is that all?” The smile fell away from her face. “Fuck, Cass. This is fucked up.”

“It’s very fucked up,” Cass said. “But at least it’s a comfortable kind of very fucked up. I will give them that. They’ll give you your own absolutely cavernous hab, bigger than Bulwark, with a 3-D printer that can make literally *anything* and access to every piece of media you could possibly want. They’ll give you all that by the end of the day and won’t expect anything for it. Really, if they weren’t so into keeping pets, I’d say they’re the perfect comrades. Hell, Nell does even with that.”

“….*Nell* is okay with it?” Trish said. “I refuse to believe that.”

“Nell is now the Captain’s personal floret,” Cass said, squashing the gut-wrenching feeling down and keeping it far away from her face. “An eager comrade of, as she puts it, the perfect revolutionary vanguard. Believe me when I say that they’re dangerous. They’re perceptive, insightful, and extremely persuasive. They’ll read you like a book, and then start making annotations in the margins, and if you’re not on guard at all times you won’t even notice until they’ve got a collar around your neck, at which point they’ll probably have you excited for it.”

They were both quiet for a long moment. “Fuck,” Trish muttered. “We’re really that boned, then?”

“We really are, and we always were,” Cass said, spreading her hands. “Sorry.”

She shook her head. “No. No, I know you. You did the best you could. Stars, I bet you’re all torn up inside even though you’ve got the whole Big Tough Stoic Captain thing on lock.” She smiled again, a gentle and honest smile. “You’re a badass, you know that, right?”

“I’m not a badass,” Cass replied, unhappy with how easily Trish had read her lingering discomfort over her many failures. “I just…do the things that need doing.”

“Yeah, that’s what real badasses say. If there’s one thing I learned before they threw me down this hole, it’s that it’s not the loud, blustery assholes you have to worry about — it’s the quiet ones. They’re thinking. They’re planning. When they come at you, they know what they’re doing, not just trying to play to an idea they have of themselves.”

“I’m not a badass.” Cass slowly stood up, dusting off her trousers. *There’s no such thing as badasses*, she thought, *only people whose fuck-ups get ignored*.

“You’re just the quiet one who’s always thinking, always planning.” Trish’s grin grew a little wider.

“We should go,” Cass said, ignoring Trish. “I don’t know how long they’re willing to wait with me in here with the potentially dangerous terran who might have a grenade.”

“Alright. Help me get packed up?” With the two of them, it was quick work, and before long they were picking their way out through the ravine, hopping from rock to rock. They said nothing. There was nothing left to say. Cass was leading her friend into the arms of the enemy, and while the alternative was worse, it did nothing to assuage her guilt, her shame. Even if it was the lesser of two evils, she thought, it was still a betrayal.

How many more times will I even get to walk on this planet? she thought to herself as she leapt from a large rock to the shallow mouth of the gully. There had been a time, when she was younger, that she couldn’t wait to get off Solstice, to hijack a ship, to fly it back to Earth and start the Revolution properly, to pull the Accord down piece by piece and watch it all burn. But now she was older, and though that anger was still there it had nowhere left to go. The Accord didn’t exist anymore, and the people responsible for its myriad evils were probably either dead or happily domesticated — *that* rankled, more than anything. She would never have her vengeance. There could never *be* a vengeance. The Affini wouldn’t allow it. The monsters who had murdered her mother, who had subjugated and abused not only their own people but an entire other sophont species, would live happy lives forevermore, doped to the gills on the finest xenodrugs the Affini had to offer.

But now, as she looked up at the grey-blue sky, she felt the strangest tie to the prison world she’d spent more than half her life on. The funky smell of the false oaks was already so familiar again she scarcely noticed it. There were only so many steps she’d take on it before the Affini closed it to her again, for years, maybe forever if they so chose, and it shocked her to feel an ache in her heart at the realization. To think, she’d *miss* this awful, miserable world that had killed so many of her friends and loved ones, that had been for decades an engine of misery and exploitation even fiercer than her homeworld.

She shook her head, needed to stay clear-minded. The fight wasn’t over, she told herself. She was no longer a young woman, no longer the bleeding edge of Revolution. The fight would

go on long after she left the field of battle. She would have to pass that torch to others, teach them to stay free, to keep their thoughts their own, and to remember that a world without the Affini was still possible.

In that way, nothing had changed. It was the revolutionary's lot to fight and struggle and die before the dawn came, to labor in darkness without ever knowing the light they sought to create. She was old, and she was tired. She had embers in her belly, not a fire — but embers could still kindle a flame. It was all she had to work with. It would have to be enough. The alternative, thought it loomed large in her mind, was unthinkable.

Chapter End Notes

The last two weeks have been an absolute slog, but here we are, and this is Chapter 27, and we are so, so close to the end, y'all.

TWO CHAPTERS REMAIN.

Chapter 28: Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

For an aging revolutionary, the arrival of the Affini means salvation for her people but it also marks the beginning of a new fight for liberation.

Chapter Notes

In which, well, you'll see.
Content warning: bondage, humiliation, exhibitionism, lots of fun drugs, and a human being mercilessly pleasured by an Affini who loves her.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had been a strange few weeks, Tsuga reflected. For the first time in a very long time, she was cohabitating with a xeno. This odd little grey-stripe terran, so sure of herself, had marched right into her life and taken up a place there as if it had been prepared for her — and while that wasn't the case, Tsuga couldn't help but feel that she fit as if it were. Though it had been bumpy at the outset, she and Cass had established a mutual rhythm of life that suited them both. Cass was independent enough to tolerate Tsuga's occasional standoffishness, and that same need for the odd bit of solitude gave Cass the space to feel safe and secure in her presence.

If only Tsuga could somehow cure her of her bizarre fear of domestication. That was the one thing holding the relationship back, the one thing that kept them from falling perfectly into synch with one another. It would certainly improve the situation for Cass, who more and more looked as though she needed the kind of comfort and safety that it would bring. This morning, Tsuga was watching her frantically taking notes in her journal over a compiled breakfast of eggs on toast that she was scarcely touching. The dark circles under her eyes spoke to an unhealthy schedule on top of bad eating habits. The poor thing was going to pieces right in front of her. She'd been getting surly again, and every time Tsuga offered her a hit from her special Class-A flower, or a bit of Class-E to take the edge off her anxieties, she refused in increasingly agitated ways. Tsuga wasn't sure *why* she was refusing it when it made her feel better, and wasn't entirely sure she believed the claim that Cass felt she needed to have a clear head to do her work.

Just take her, she told herself. *Stop being so selfish. She needs you*.

It *was* selfish, Tsuga knew, to keep persisting in this forlorn hope that Cass would come around on her own, would ask to be domesticated. If she loved the little creature — and by

now there was no denying that she did — she should do the right thing for her, shouldn't she? But it was that love that stayed her vines, too. Cass's wishes meant too much to her to simply ignore them outright, even if they were an obvious source of pain. All the training she'd received when she'd joined the *Tillandsia*'s crew hadn't prepared her for such a conundrum.

"How long have you been awake?" Tsuga asked, kneeling down next to the terran's little table.

Cass grunted, then shrugged. "Hour. Maybe two."

"Should I check the hab's records?"

"…longer, probably," Cass muttered. "Working."

"Yes, your big meeting today, I know," Tsuga said. "Final votes on the Charter, election of permanent representatives. You must be relieved that it'll all be behind you soon."

Cass did not look relieved. She'd been getting more haggard, more visibly stressed out by the day. Tsuga wasn't sure if the other terrans were noticing it, but it was obvious to her — the little trembles in her hands, the way her eyes would saccade back and forth without fixing on anything, the soft rocking back and forth whenever she could spare the motion. She was miserable, that much was certain.

"I'm fine," Cass said, not looking up, not pausing in her relentless scribbling. She'd filled half the volume with notes already, and she'd only compiled it last week, to replace the notebook she'd already filled.

"… you don't seem fine," Tsuga said gently. "You seem very stressed out, in fact. Maybe you should take a short break."

"I can't *take a break*," Cass snapped. "I have *work*. I have to have everything in order before this vote or everything's *fucked*."

"Cass, my darling, nothing is going to be fucked if you pause for ten minutes to actually eat your breakfast." Tsuga hoped the tactical use of profanity would earn a smile, but alas, such was the depth of Cass's irritation and unease that it passed unnoticed.

"I wouldn't expect you to understand. You come from a post-scarcity utopia where your species is the uncontested authority on literally everything. *I* come from a prison planet. I'm not even talking about Solstice! The Accord was a prison from top to bottom, a machine of suffering and exploitation, and I will *not* allow what we build here to turn into *that*!"

"Neither will we." Tsuga kept her voice gentle but added an understone of firmness, of certainty. "I promise."

Cass froze, her pen scratching to a stop on the paper. "Tsuga, has it occurred to you that I don't consider that reassuring in the slightest?"

"…no, actually," Tsuga said — which was true. They both wanted the same thing, domestication aside. "Why?"

“Because you don’t give us a *choice*,” Cass spat, slamming the pen against the table with the flat of her hand. “Because everything has to be your way!”

“Our way is best,” Tsuga said. “We have rather a lot of experience and evidence to back that up.”

“Yes, because you refuse to allow anyone else to develop to your level before you swoop in and domesticate them!” She was on her feet now, turning to face Tsuga, her face screwed up in anger. “You refuse to allow anything we do to *matter*, because in the end you’ll have us all collared and doped out of our minds! Why can’t you just *leave us alone?!*” She stood there, huffing for breath after her outburst, shoulders heaving as she stared up at Tsuga.

“Would you leave someone in pain to suffer if you knew you could help them?” Tsuga asked. “If you came upon someone who was terribly injured, who needed medical care, and who was loudly insisting that they were fine and that you should go away, would you leave them?”

“That’s not the same thing and you know it,” Cass growled. “That’s not the same thing at all!”

“From our perspective, it very much is.” She shifted slightly, leaning closer. “I’m only concerned for your well-being, the same as we all are for all of you. You know that by now, I know you do.” Cass had been on the *Tillandsia* long enough, had spent enough time around Leah and other florets, had seen her own comrades accept the Affini. She was simply hurting, at her limit or near enough to be indistinguishable. The break-through had to come soon, didn’t it? *Please, ask me*, she thought. *Ask me and let this hurting stop*. *You need this*.

Cass must have been thinking the same thing, because she said nothing, just stared up at Tsuga for a long moment. “I have to get back to work,” she said quietly, turning back to the table. “I have to be ready. I can’t just abandon them.”

“Eat first, then work,” Tsuga said.

“Despite your fetish for domestication I am *not* your pet,” Cass snapped. “So stop treating me like one!”

Tsuga clamped down on the reflexive shudder, hopefully fast enough to keep it hidden; Cass’s words had been like a blow to her core. *You could fix that so easily*, she thought. *But until then I’ll do what I have to do to help you the way we still are*. “It’s true,” she said softly. “You are not my pet. But you are my friend, and I am worried about you. So please eat.”

Cass glared at Tsuga over her shoulder, but acquiesced, taking a bite of her cold toast and eggs before going back to scribbling in her notebook. Tsuga felt a bit of relief — things weren’t so bad she couldn’t get a handle on them if she needed to. Cass simply needed special care and handling. Even Tsuga knew that some xenos were like that. *Maybe once this government thing is settled*, she thought, *we can begin making progress again*.

“All those in favor? Thank you. And those opposed? Thank you. In the opinion of the chair, the ayes have it and the motion is carried.” There was an audible sigh of relief throughout the room, and a soft susurrus of whispers from around its fringes. The chair, a middle-aged man from Featherstone Cass had never met and whose only qualifications for the chairmanship were a decent understanding of Robert’s Rules and not belonging to any of the major factions who wouldn’t tolerate any of the others having one of their own in charge, smiled and lifted his gavel. “And with that, friends, I believe the business of the People’s Provisional Government of Solstice is concluded.” He brought it down with a firm, clear *tap* on the tabletop, and sporadic applause broke out around the room. Slowly, social gravity pulled others into applauding, some enthusiastically, some reservedly, some grudgingly.

Cass did not applaud. She felt hollow inside, both because this agreement ultimately represented a defeat and because the work *wasn’t* over. Elections would come next, and she’d have to ensure the right people made it in. Entryism would never work, and she knew it, but it was the only lever left to her. The slim margins of regional autonomy would never hold out against state power, not without a lot of pushback. Whoever sat in that chair would have to have some real fire in them.

Perhaps it was silly of her to care so much — the government would have no real authority. She’d read the Human Domestication Treaty, and while supposedly they were getting one of their own, she couldn’t imagine it’d be any less strict when it came to human autonomy from the Affini. No, they would get what they wanted. They *always* got what they wanted. Everything she was doing was meaningless, just like it had been before. It was amazing, in a way, how the Affini could simply obliterate meaning without even trying.

“Well, you got your way, the government’s totally useless for any kind of real central planning. Happy?” Mycek had come around the table as people began to mill around. The sunline shining in through the skylights highlighted his receding hairline with just a touch of glare.

Cass smiled up at him — appearances were important, and Mycek was one of those men who always had to feel like they had the last word. “If I achieve such a victory again, I shall return to Epirus without a single soldier.” Let him chew on that one for a while.

Sadly, he didn’t take the bait. “Regardless of our differences, we have to work together, if only against the Affini. We need unity on this, and I know you know that.”

“What we need, we do not and cannot have,” Cass replied. “I’ve said that this entire time. Fighting them is pointless.”

“But a negotiated solution may still be available to us,” Mycek pressed on. “Now that we have a legitimate government representing the whole planet, instead of a loosely affiliated band of individualist outposts, they’ll have to take us seriously.”

Cass knew full well that the Affini didn’t *have* to do anything they didn’t want to do, but she didn’t want to be drawn into this debate with Mycek. He might not have had the same willingness to descend into a screaming match as Nell, but if anything his ability to place absolute faith in historical inevitability was stronger. “Well, when we elect a representative

for Elysium, you can talk their ear off about it," she said. "As you may have heard, the provisional government's business is done."

"Please." Mycek rolled his eyes theatrically. "As if the great Cass Hope would ever tolerate *anyone* else having their hands on the levers of power. Not only will you *obviously* be the representative, I fully expect you to try and lean on everyone you can and build some kind of a coalition that gives you full control."

"…what the hell are you talking about?" Cass said, her eyes fixing on that smug smile of his.

"I'm saying you're the worst anarchist I've ever met. Oh, you *believe* all this individualist nonsense, I'm not saying you don't, but when push comes to shove you *always* glom onto as much power as you can. It's the one rational thing about you. Even when we basically didn't *have* a government to speak of, when we were all hiding in holes in the ground, *everyone* knew you were in charge. No one ever doubted that."

Cass blinked. What the hell was Mycek talking about? "In the sense that Bulwark was always intended to be the point of first contact with the enemy, and therefore in a position to inform others about–"

"No no no," he interrupted. "I'm not talking about Bulwark being the obvious bullseye, I'm talking about how nothing important got done without you having a chance to put your finger on the scale."

"People asked for my opinion. Was I not supposed to give it?"

"They weren't asking for your *opinion*. They were asking for your *permission*," Mycek said. The smile fell away, and it didn't improve his face any. "Come on, drop the act, I can see right through it."

"It's not an act," Cass said, meeting his eyes and glaring. "If I take point on things, it's because I want to make sure things get done properly, and I want to make sure we don't backslide into the same shit we're supposed to be overthrowing."

He met her glare unflinching. Not many could do that. "Six of one, half a dozen of the other," he said. "Don't expect me to lie down and let you run roughshod over things the way you did over the provisional government. We're not going to sacrifice progress on the altar of individualism, not anymore."

"And as usual, you're talking out your ass," Cass replied. "At least Nell knew how to argue her points instead of just asserting them."

"Well, Nell's not around anymore, and even if she was, don't assume we'd be putting her in charge," he spat. "Clearly there was something wrong with her from the start if she gave in that easily."

"Fuck off, Mycek." Cass was beginning to regret explaining Nell's absence, but it wasn't as if she could have left the question open — and in any case, they were like as not to find out she was a floret sooner or later. The rumor mill had been spinning ever since, and every time

someone came up to ask Cass to confirm something absolutely nonsensical that they'd been told, it grated on her every nerve. "Go salivate over the prospect of a dictatorship of the proletariat, for all the good it'll do you." She swept up her notebook and stood, stalking away, and if Mycek made any response, she didn't listen for it.

It wasn't as if any of it mattered. The Affini were in charge, and the Affini would stay in charge. Anything to counteract them would need to operate long-term, and that wasn't something Mycek or his kind of centralism would countenance. To keep the embers of freedom stoked would be a project that defied infrastructure, defied government, defied geography — it would be a thing of the human heart. That was all it ever could be, especially in the face of the weaponized paradise the Compact represented.

How would they do it? Cass had plans, of course, plans within plans. Half of the last week had been planning for what happened *after* the final vote, the things that would need to be done to keep the Affini from encroaching any further than they already had. Part of her had been writing it down hoping she could make clandestine copies, hand them off one by one to be disseminated among the terran population. Once it was out there, once those concepts found fertile soil in the minds of the reader, even the Affini would have trouble rooting them all out. It was a long game, and one Cass would play in a single move. Then, she could let the government do what it would, and pull back. Her work would finally be done, and she could at long last unclench. That was the dream: the dream that all this could finally be over.

But it's not, she told herself. *It's never over*. Mycek was right about one thing — she was a perfectionist. She wasn't ashamed to admit it. Something would inevitably draw her back in. Someone would come to her with questions, looking for advice, looking for a hand, and that would be the pebble that started the avalanche anew.

This wasn't the end, oh no — barely even the beginning. She'd be doing this until she drew her last breath, and knowing her, her restless shade would find a way to keep working at it even afterwards. *It never ends. Fight back, and keep on fighting, because it never ends.* She felt the ache in her heart, and the weight on her shoulders. She needed air. Real air, even if it didn't stink like false oak.

It was in the entryway that she found Andoa. "Ah, Captain Hope," e purred, leaning over just a little to peer down at her. "Always a pleasure. And how goes democracy, hmm?" There was something about eir body, something about the way e carried emself, that struck Cass as different — but then, with how fluidly the Affini treated their own shape, that could have meant any number of things.

"About as well as ever," she replied, "which is to say, it makes me question the sanity of my comrades and want to tear my hair out."

"That well, eh?" E grinned, a little too wide as usual, and straightened. "Well, I do look forward to the negotiation with your shiny new government. I take it that you've finished the preliminaries?"

"We have a structure to work with, yes," Cass said. "Elections still need to happen." And she would need to stand in them, and while she was fairly certain no one would oppose her for

the Pan-Elysian Anarchist Confederation's seat, that didn't mean she could treat it as de facto hers in the meantime.

"Adorable, absolutely adorable. Well, I know any negotiations will have to wait until after that, but I thought I'd come down, stick my head in, say hello, official congratulations, et cetera et cetera, and hand off a copy of the Human Domestication Treaty for everyone to peruse ahead of time. I know we Affini tend to go a little overboard on the paperwork — but really, can you blame us? — and this will ensure everyone knows where we stand going into the negotiations."

"For negotiations, read 'you get everything you want,'" Cass grumbled. "I know how this works."

"Oh, come now, don't be so cynical," Andoa said. "I'll have you know we've already revised it significantly as concerns Solstice. For example, the section on capitalism is *completely* different, since you have your own idiolect for discussing the nature of value and labor! Oh, you should seen Lenta when I showed it *Capital*, Cass, it was absolutely beside itself with glee."

"That…actually doesn't surprise me," Cass admitted. "But you know what I mean. You're never going to let us be autonomous. You're never going to take the threat of domestication off the table."

"*Threat?*" Andoa raised a random assortment of eir six eyebrow fronds. "My my my, all this time among us and you still think domestication is a punishment?"

"When you hold it over my head unless I behave, it's hard to see it as anything but."

"We're not holding it over your head," Andoa said gently. "Cass, you've read the treaty. You know that most of it is solely concerned with the welfare of your species. It's functionally a how-to guide for *us*, a guide on how to ensure that your species is as happy as we can possibly make it."

"Happy in a utilitarian sense, perhaps. I'm not a utilitarian."

"You don't seem terribly happy, either," Andoa replied, a note of concern in eir voice. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Fight back, she told herself. *This is just em trying to get to you. Just one more field of battle.* She would have to play it off right. "No, I'm fine," she said, shaking her head. "Just been dealing with people all day. Need to decompress."

"If you say so. Well, Nell and I are going to go ahead and deliver the treaty. You take care of yourself."

"Or else," Cass muttered. "Wait, Nell?" She glanced around, but no one else was in the entryway, and she certainly hadn't seen Nell inside. As she looked up at Andoa, confused, the moss-creature grinned once more and leaned in close, holding a single, long finger to its 'lips' as the vines that made up eir chest began to unweave themselves ever so slightly,

becoming a mesh. Through that mesh, Cass saw a shivering mass of terran, red-faced and trussed up in vines, clutching a heavy binder to her chest. Nell's eyes blinked rapidly at the light, her dilated pupils only giving the barest fraction of ground. The vine gagging her mouth made it impossible for her to talk, for her to smile or frown or to do anything but moan. Her eyes finally fixed on Cass, and she made a soft noise that might have been her calling out to her.

And there wasn't a trace of fear in Nell's eyes. Not a trace of worry, or anger, or frustration. For the brief moment she locked eyes with Nell, all Cass saw there was comfort, relief, and endless joy. Nell *loved* what the Captain was doing to her, and that feeling was written across her red-cheeked face as plain as day. Even Cass couldn't miss it. Then, the vines slipped back into place over her, tightening back into the slightly-less-svelte-than-usual chest Andoa was sporting today. "Don't mind us," Andoa said, winking with three or four of eir eyes. "We're just going to go give everyone a nice surprise." E straightened, and walked past Cass — she was too stunned at what she'd just seen to say anything, to move to stop the Captain, or to do much of anything except dwell on what she was feeling.

It wasn't right. It wasn't right at all. She squeezed her hands into fists and shut her eyes, seething. Heat crawled up the back of her neck, into her head, right behind her eyes. The shame of it, the overpowering *shame*. Her stomach in knots, she bit her lip and admonished herself. *Fight back. Fight back. Fight back!*

It wasn't right. It wasn't right at all.

She shouldn't feel *jealous* of what Nell was having done to her.

But that part of her was still there, the part of her that wanted to hand off her notes on how to maintain revolutionary thought in the world the Affini were making and forget about them, the part of her that wanted *not* to stand for election, the part of her that just wanted to be left *alone* for once in her fucking life, the part of her that wanted to be held, the part of her that wanted to be allowed to be anything other than the stern, stoic, strong leader that she'd had to be for more than half her life. That part of her was still there, and it *wanted* that. It wanted not to have to worry. It wanted not to have to fight. It had always been there, underneath it all. She had always had to force herself to fight, because she *had* to fight, because there was nothing left *but* the fight. Wasn't there?

Hot tears stung Cass's eyes as she choked down the furious bile rising in her throat. Her heart pounded in her chest, in her throat, in her temples, a drumbeat marching to war with itself. She couldn't just give in like this. But what about the rule? *Fight as long as you can, and when you can't anymore, know it and say it.* That had always been the rule. Why wouldn't the rule apply to her too? Because it couldn't — if she gave up, that was it, wasn't it? Who would do the work of revolution? Who would burn the candle at both ends to make it all work? No one else should have to do that. That was Cass's burden, and she carried it, if not gladly, then with resolve.

And what happened when that resolve broke? She shook her head, hugged herself, and stode out of the entryway and into the open ship beyond. The sunline was bright, the breeze was gentle, and it was a beautiful day on the *Tillandsia*. Everything was perfectly engineered by

the Affini to be exactly as it should be. It felt like a warped mirror that reflected the opposite of how Cass felt.

She couldn't let her resolve break. She couldn't. She wasn't allowed to stop.

Fight back. Fight back! FIGHT BACK!

The walking felt good. It was a place to direct her energy. The stones and moss and grass and tough little flowers bore up under her stomping pace. She walked, and walked, not really caring where she ended up. Trees, habs, plazas, transit stations — they all blurred together into a background noise of alien perfection that Cass skittered across like a drop of water on an oily surface.

She couldn't let it in. She couldn't let it break her.

She wasn't sure how long she spent walking like that, how long it was before she found herself facing the door of her hab as it slid open before her. When it closed and shut out the gentle sounds of the outdoors, she felt a sense of relief flood through her. Here, at least, she felt safe. She could unclench, breathe, let the tears stream down her cheeks. The only Affini here wasn't a threat.

"Cass?" Speak of the devil — Tsuga was already standing over her, vibrating with concern. When had she emerged? Had Cass lost track of time again, lost in her feelings? "Cass, are you alright?" She knelt down next to Cass, one hand held out, and Cass eagerly leaned into it. The pressure and weight of it helped a little, a feeling of being grounded and secure competing with the sense that she was losing control of herself, losing her grip on everything that mattered. "Did something happen at the vote?"

Cass shook her head. "Not…no," she mumbled, still clutching at herself. "Just too much."

Tsuga let out a very convincing sigh — she was getting better at human gestures. "I told you that you've been overworking yourself. No wonder you're so wound up. I'll run you a bath and cook you something nice for dinner. Maybe I'll try making fesenjoon. Would you like that?"

For a moment, the thought of a warm bath and a big bowl of stew sounded absolutely heavenly, but only for a moment. *No, no, no! This is the same thing the Captain was doing! Every offer is a trap! Every kindness is a weapon! Fight back!* She shook her head, a sob suddenly welling up and bursting out of her mouth.

"Cass, darling, please. You're hurting." The pressure from Tsuga's hand grew fractionally more intense. "Let me help." A familiar flower emerged from inside Tsuga, the petals blossoming enticingly, but Cass batted it away before it could get close. "Cass–"

"No!" Cass shouted, her tears redoubling and half-choking her voice. "No xenodrugs!"

"Why not? You're in pain and I can help. Let me help, *please*."

Something in the tone of that last word — the desperation, the need, the echoed hurt — was too much for Cass. She felt another sob burst out of her, and with it came a torrent of emotion she had been repressing days, maybe weeks. “Because I don’t deserve it!” she blurted out, turning away and burying her face into Tsuga’s hand. *No, no, no, you don’t say things like that! You don’t* want *it, it isn’t something you wish you could have. Fight back!*

“What in the world do you mean, you don’t deserve it?” Tsuga’s other hand moved in to gently rest on Cass’s back, and even through her storm inside of her Cass felt a frisson of comfort.

Cass shook her head. *Don’t acknowledge it, don’t even admit you said it. Just ignore it. Ignore it and it’ll go away*.

“Cass.” Tsuga’s massive hands gently spun her around, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. She found herself looking up at those enormous, shining eyes, the tears in her own the only thing keeping her from falling forever into them. “Why do you believe that you deserve to hurt? Is this about what you told me before? About what you did in the wild? We talked about that, that doesn’t have to have any bearing on who you are now that you’re safe. And you *are* safe.”

“Not like that,” Cass whimpered, rubbing at her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket and looking away. *Fuck, I’m a mess. No wonder she thinks I’m an easy mark*. “I just…I can’t. I can’t let myself. I have to stay clear-headed.”

“I’m not going to accept that excuse anymore. Please tell me what’s bothering you,” Tsuga said gently, hovering over her. “I promise I won’t do anything you don’t ask me for, but I need to know what’s hurting you.”

She took a deep, stuttering breath, and let it out slowly. The tears began to trickle to a halt. “I’m just *tired*. I’m tired of all this fucking politics, and I’m tired of banging my head against statist bullshit.” She felt like there was a rock in her gut in the shape of a lie. It was a lie of omission, but it was still a lie, and she didn’t want to lie to Tsuga. She was an Affini, yes, and self-admittedly in favor of domestication, but she at least respected Cass enough to do not *do* it. Shouldn’t she afford Tsuga the same respect? “And I’m tired of walking on eggshells to avoid being domesticated. You say I’m *safe* but I don’t feel like it.”

“Why do you feel as if you’re walking on…eggshells?” She sounded puzzled. “While it would depend on the species, of course, I can’t imagine they would provide a terribly stable surface for it.”

“It’s an idiom,” Cass said. “Means I’m nervous. Like every step is about to break something irreversibly.”

“Ah. And you feel this way about living aboard the *Tillandsia?*”

“I feel this way about the *Affini*. No matter where I go, it’ll be the same, won’t it? You’ll always be there, and I’ll always be under suspicion, and sooner or later my bucking against the system will cross some invisible line in the sand and then it’s off to domestication!”

Tsuga seemed to think this over. “I can see why you might be concerned,” she admitted. “But remember, I filed a Notice of Intent to Domesticate. That’s still active. No matter what happens, Cass, if that decision is made, you’ll come right back to me.”

“There’s no *if* about it,” Cass said, looking away. “You know it and I know it. You always get what you want, and I can’t stop myself from fighting. You and Polyphylla went digging around in my head, you’ve seen it, haven’t you? It’s always on my mind, Tsuga, *always*. I see a system rife with injustice and I can’t help but want to tear it down. I don’t know how to not be that person.”

“Polyphylla’s analysis *was* rather pessimistic about your long-term prospects for independence, it’s true,” Tsuga said. “But there’s a non-zero possibility, according to her. Together, I think, we can steer you that way — and I think it’ll be easier for you if you let me help you with this stress you’re feeling.”

“It’s not about the stress,” Cass protested. “It’s about what I’m going to *do*.” Part of her squirmed uncomfortably at the thought of revealing operational secrets like this. *Fight back!* it told her, but she quashed it with a compromise — she wouldn’t say anything specific. “I’m going to fight, you know I will, and I’m going to drag others into it. I’m going to run for a seat in the government and I’m going to fight tooth and nail every step of the way to make problems for you. I know those problems won’t amount to much, but it’ll be enough, I know it will. If I keep this up, I’m fucked.”

“And as you said, you feel that you can’t stop yourself,” Tsuga said softly. “Is that the conundrum?”

Cass sniffed and nodded. Her eyes ached, and her sinuses felt like one massive swollen block of misery. “You always get what you want,” she muttered. “One way or another. And you want me.”

“…I do. Because I love you, and I want you to be happy, and I want to be the one who makes you happy.” She paused. “I would very much like to cuddle you right now, and I think it would be good for you, too. Would that be alright?” Cass hesitated for a moment, then nodded, and in seconds she was airborne as Tsuga stood, clutching her to her broad, soft chest. She was enveloped by Tsuga’s presence, her scent, the pressure of her arms and hands and body. She felt some — not all, but some — of her stress slip away as she nuzzled into the soft vines, as one hand clutched at a ridge of bark that served Tsuga as a collarbone.

Don’t say it. Don’t say it. Of all the things you cannot say, you cannot *say this*. But the voice in the back of her head wasn’t as strong as the feeling building in her chest, and it gave way before long, pushed aside by the sheer force of need. “I love you too,” Cass whispered. And she did. She had for some time, but had never thought to put it into words even to herself. Tsuga had been there for her from the beginning, had stood in her corner at every opportunity, and if they quarreled it was because they were talking past one another, not because they were truly at odds. Hearing Tsuga say those words had crystallized them within Cass, and now she couldn’t deny it any more than she could deny her nature.

And that was the problem, because her nature, after twenty-plus years of honing, was to *fight back*. Whatever she had once been, she had buried beneath that armor, that drive, and it had

served her, if not well, loyally. But now there was something in her strong enough to rival that drive, the need to tear down injustice, the urge to burn corruption and exploitation to ashes and salt the earth where once it had stood. She was at a crossroads, and for the first time in a long time, there *was* a choice to be made.

“I’m going to be domesticated no matter what happens, aren’t I?” she whispered.

Tsuga was silent for a moment, her vines tenderly coiling around Cass’s body. “It’s likely, but not certain.”

“It’s going to happen,” Cass said. “We both know it.” *Don’t. Don’t. DON’T! Fight back, you coward!* She gritted her teeth, swallowed heavily, and continued. “So…just do it. Just get it over with. I’m so tired, and I don’t want to hurt anyone else. I don’t want to drag anyone else down with me.”

She felt Tsuga’s vines tighten around her. “You’re quite certain you want this?” Her voice had changed, somehow, now rich with overtones and undertones that reverberated throughout Cass, pressed up against her as she was. It shook her and filled her, and for just a heartbeat Cass went so lightheaded she was worried that she’d been somehow dosed.

“As much as I can want it…I just want this to stop,” Cass whispered. “But I have one condition.” She looked up at Tsuga, her eyes brimming over with tears again. “Don’t make me forget, I can’t– I owe it to everyone I’ve hurt, everyone I’ve fucked over, not to forget.”

“Not to mention everyone you’ve helped, everyone you’ve protected, everyone you’ve inspired,” Tsuga said, smiling warmly, her eyes flashing with gold that threatened to push out every other color in them, deep and profound and powerful. Even with her blurred vision Cass could feel their pull. “As much as I’m able, I’ll let you keep your memories. If I’m going to help you, I’m going to need to blunt some of those traumas at least a little. Is there anything else you’re concerned about?”

“Just… don’t keep me completely high all the time, please,” she said, laughing awkwardly. *Take it back. You can still take it back. She’ll let you go if you ask*. She swallowed and quashed the urge. She wasn’t going to do this anymore. She didn’t have to. She finally had a way out.

“You’ll be exactly as high as you want to be — which may be higher than you think you want to be,” Tsuga said, grinning. For just a brief moment, as she reached in with a few vines to brush the tears from Cass’s eyes, she looked almost like the Captain. But the grin wasn’t as important as her eyes, oh her *eyes*, and how they grew and grew and grew. “Oh, Cass,” Tsuga purred. “You can’t know how happy you’ve made me. I’m sorry I made you wait so long.”

“Made…me?” Words were becoming hard. There was so much of Tsuga and so little of her, and she was so beautiful it almost hurt to look.

“I could have taken you before now. I could have chased all this pain away, but I wanted you to want it. I wanted you to understand. Do you understand now, my love? Can you find it in that sweet little heart of yours to forgive me?”

Could she forgive Tsuga? Cass's thoughts were slow, like pomegranate molasses, thick and sticky and tart and sweet, sweet like like Tsuga. Was it possible for any living being to approach perfection? If so, she'd found that being. Could she forgive Tsuga for making her wait for this? "…yeah," she squeaked, at least thirty seconds after she tried to say that and more. There was something else there, something itchy and uncomfortable, but it wasn't enough to break through the lacquer of Cass's heavy thoughts, through the beauty and radiance of Tsuga as she enveloped Cass with nothing more than her existence.

"Good girl," Tsuga whispered, and it hit Cass like a sudden gust of hot summer wind rushing through the souks of Zerqamîsh, the kind of wind that felt as if God Himself had reached down and given you a shove. She shivered and bit her lip, even as she felt the soft petals of a flower press against her face. "Now breathe, little one. You've been needing this."

Cass did as she was told, the rich and savory scent of not-quite cinnamon only slightly dampened by the state of her sinuses. Within seconds, she felt the xenodrug take hold, as every micro-movement of vines across her body rippled endlessly up and down across her skin. "Good girl," Tsuga repeated, her vines snaking across Cass's body, slipping up under her shirt, tugging her shoes off, gently stripping her jacket — every moment of it bliss that sent Cass reeling. "Oh, I've been waiting for this for *so* long," she murmured.

"Aaah?" Cass could barely move her mouth, and even the act of making that soft noise set up vibrations in her body that set her skin tingling. She saw vines upon vines hovering over her as Tsuga began to unweave parts of herself, and then–

If what had come before was bliss, what happened next was orders of magnitude beyond that. More and more of Cass's skin was exposed as Tsuga methodically stripped her, and whenever new skin was exposed her vines found it and set to work. She felt the prickly touch of her needles, the soft slithering of her vines, the rough scraping of her bark, all of it at once like a whirlwind. She was helpless against it, her soul cast adrift to swirl helplessly. If she were at anyone else's mercy, she would be terrified, but in Tsuga's vines, she knew she was safe, knew she was loved. She felt vines pry her legs apart to tease the insides of her thigh, felt a thick vine play with her lips before snaking inside her mouth. Its heady taste filled Cass's mind, and that too set ripples and reverberations rushing within her. She was like a drum, taut and vibrating with each beat of her heart; like a diaphanous scarf, caught in the wind and shapelessly tumbling.

On some level, she was vaguely aware that she was squirming, moaning, bucking against Tsuga, the enormous Affini holding her securely in her lap as she sat on her sofa, smiling down at her as she played with every inch of Cass's body. How long had it been? Seconds? Minutes? Hours? Time had ceased to matter — she was in Tsuga's vines, and she was Tsuga's to play with, Tsuga's to mold and change. She had given herself up utterly to this beautiful, incredible creature, this force of nature, and that absolute loss of control gave her a paradoxical sense of safety. After all, the Affini always got what they wanted, and Tsuga wanted Cass to be safe.

"Good girl, Cass." Tsuga's voice, gentle though it was, broke through the whirlwind like a hand reaching down to seize and squeeze her, ripping a loud and desperate moan from her lips that crowded around the vine still playing with her tongue. In that instant of clarity, she

felt every vine lovingly toying with her body, top to bottom, and looked up at Tsuga towering above her, larger than life, filling up the hab with herself and her love for Cass — and there inside her, within a heart that beat in time with the thrumming pulses of Tsuga's own internal biorhythms, was Cass's love for Tsuga.

And for the first time in a long time, Cass Hope felt at peace.

"Finally!" Polyphylla said as she sat on her overgrown sofa next to Tsuga. "I thought she'd *never* realize she was functionally already your pet. You were only cooking for her, watching over her, handling all her paperwork, handling her veterinary needs–"

"She had a lot to work through," Tsuga said, stroking Cass gently. The little terran was sprawled in her lap, quite insensate, murmuring and occasionally gently humping Tsuga's thigh, her eyes glazed and fixed on a point in the distance. "And to be fair, so did I."

"Well, I'm very happy for the both of you," Polyphylla said, leaning into Tsuga. Several of her vines began to probe at Tsuga, and as usual she opened herself to allow them in, and sent a few vines back Polyphylla's way. "And I know Leah will be absolutely delighted. She's been beside herself this whole time Cass has been obsessed with her little government, you know?"

"Well, that won't be a problem anymore, will it, Cass?" Tsuga said, chuckling and petting her terran. Cass made a soft noise and looked up — she wasn't quite gone enough to not recognize her own name — then blinked and leaned back into Tsuga, mumbling something incoherent.

"Quite the change," Polyphylla added with a warm laugh of her own. "Trying to break her in?"

"She asked for it, actually," Tsuga said. "She's afraid she'll try to back out, so she wants to be like this all the way up to her implantation. And, since I need to get her ramped up anyway…"

"That's absolutely adorable," Polyphylla said, reaching into ruffle Cass's hair and earning a mewl of helpless pleasure from her. "It does simplify things a lot, doesn't it?"

"Well, I do miss the conversation, but I know she's not minding it, at least."

"And Leah will be thrilled. She should be home from her date with Imogen and Ella soon. Oh, I can't *wait* to see her face."

"Neither can I," Tsuga said, and it was true — Leah had a way of absolutely lighting up with delight at even the littlest things, and Cass always seemed to elicit a very strong reaction from her. "We'll have to make sure they have lots of time together."

"About that–" Polyphylla shifted slightly, and her biorhythms sharpened suddenly. There was no missing the change in mood, not half-in-and-half-out of each other the way they were.

“What are you being so serious about all of a sudden?” Tsuga said. “Is something wrong?”

“No, no, nothing’s wrong, it’s just– well, you’ve seen the two of them together. I think it’s quite clear they’re well on their way to being pinnates. Leah certainly feels that way about Cass already, I think. She misses her other girlfriends when they’re not available, but with Cass it’s getting to the point of pining.”

Tsuga thought about it for a moment. It was true: Leah was very fixated on Cass, more so than was usual for her — but then, Tsuga had only known the sweet little terran for a few months. “You would know best, I suppose, she’s your pet and you’re the terran expert. What do you suppose we should do, ensure regular visitation?”

“…I was thinking more along the lines of–“ She paused, her vines riffling in a very flustered way. *What the dirt’s the matter with her*? Tsuga wondered. “It’s just– I know it must feel very sudden and all, but– that is to say– ohhhh!” She nearly discorporated, but forced herself back into a terran-like shape quickly. “I’m sorry, I’m just very, very nervous about this.”

“About what? Polyphylla, you can talk to me about anything, you know that.” The two of them didn’t quite have a mentor relationship, like Tsuga did with Pisca — Polyphylla was established enough and an expert in her own (very different) field that they’d sorted themselves out into a perfectly ordinary friendship, if admittedly one Tsuga still felt as though she was feeling out as she went along. This galaxy’s subculture was very different from what she was used to.

“Yes, but you’re– you’re *you*,” she said. “You’re four times my age, you’ve been all over multiple sub-galaxies, you’re an experienced archaeologist *and* climatic engineer, and I’m… I’m good at terran brains, and that’s it! Can you blame me for feeling a little inadequate next to you?”

“You’re hardly inadequate,” Tsuga said. It seemed like the sort of time for a friendly gesture, so Tsuga curled a few vines around Polyphylla. “You are very impressive, in fact. Or haven’t you noticed me following your lead when it comes to terrans?”

“Yes, but that’s different,” Polyphylla complained. “It has absolutely no bearing on the fact that I feel like I have no right to ask someone as amazing as you to merge your hab with mine after we’ve scarcely been companions for a few terran lunar days!”

Tsuga had clearly not heard that right. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Oh *frost*, I said it, didn’t I?” Another full-body shudder threatened her shape. “Well, there, it’s out in the open. And it *is* the right thing for our pets, but I still worry that I’m rushing things. You understand, don’t you? And I certainly don’t mind if you want to keep your segment of the collective hab to your standards, Everbloom, I don’t want to force my aesthetic sensibilities onto you!”

“N-no,” Tsuga said. “That’s not the the thing I was– I mean, *yes*, you’re probably right about it being necessary, but– we’re companions? When did that happen?”

Polyphylla was silent for a long moment before she burst out laughing. “Tsuga! You have what terrans would call a *masterful* deadpot expression! I thought you were serious!”

Tsuga immediately froze, every vine locking in place. She had absolutely no idea how to navigate this situation. Honesty seemed, despite the bluntness, the best way through. “I don’t mean to be rude or– well, I just… I thought we were friends?”

Polyphylla went, if not as rigid as Tsuga, very still. “You *are* serious? But… Tsuga, how can you think we’re just friends? You *do* realize you have a vine about eight and a half centimeters from my core this very moment, don’t you?”

“I…do?” Tsuga hadn’t been aware of it, though one of her vines was resting on something rather warmer than the rest of Polyphylla. She tried to withdraw it immediately. “I’m sorry, I didn’t–“

“No, no, it’s *fine*,” Polyphylla said, several of her vines snaking around the vine in question and holding it in place. “I like it. I like *you*. I just–“ She laughed. “I just thought you wanted to take things slowly, and I certainly didn’t mind. You know I have the utmost respect for you. This Cass and Leah situation just sort of…forces things, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose,” Tsuga admitted. “I didn’t realize– I’m sorry, this isn’t something I have a lot of experience with.”

“I know,” Polyphylla said, her voice and biorhythms synchronizing into a reassuring cadence. Several more of her vines slithered into Tsuga’s body, but remained near the surface. “That’s why– well,I suppose that’s how I misunderstood what I thought were your advances, which were *very* welcome even if they weren’t actually advances. Does that make sense?”

“I was perhaps not in my best state of mind. You know how it is when you approach the end of a Bloom. Now add in anxiety and new surroundings…” In hindsight, it wasn’t that surprising that she’d somehow accidentally entered into a relationship with Polyphylla — nearing a rebloom, she’d been subconsciously seeking anywhere she might safely root herself. And this *was*, she thought, a safe place to root herself. And it would be good to have someone to look after Cass while she rebloomed. It wouldn’t be far off, only a few terran years. “I certainly don’t object to the idea, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“…to the companionship, or to merging habs?” Polyphylla asked. There was a tentativeness to her voice, and to the gentle movements of her vines inside Tsuga.

“To both,” Tsuga replied, and with a gentle tug she freed her creeping vine and pushed it just a little deeper into Polyphylla — not quite to the point of touching her core, but she could feel its warmth quite palpably. She felt Polyphylla relax, felt her core shift until its cilia brushed against her vine’s own, a rough and ticklish sensation she clearly appreciated, judging from the way her biorhythms shifted suddenly.

“I’ve been wanting this for a while,” she admitted, her own vines probing deeper. For a moment, Tsuga nearly tensed up reflexively, but with a moment’s concentration she let her own body shift and open up, and soon she felt Polyphylla’s vines on her core as well, a

shivering feeling that she hadn't expected. "Oh, you're *warm*. Are you sure you're nearing the end of this Bloom? Because that's quite the biorhythm I'm feeling~"

"After seven Blooms, I think I know my own cycle," Tsuga said, opening herself up further. Cass shifted on her lap, and Tsuga spared a few more vines for her, stroking her gently and slipping beneath her clothes. *Don't think I'll leave you out of the fun, pet*, she thought, letting the shivers from Polyphylla's teasing of her core ripple all through her. Cass would feel every pulse, every shudder, and every touch would give her pleasure as Polyphylla did the same for her. *I should have done this Blooms ago*, she thought as she let her form collapse under the onslaught. She felt and heard Cass's soft moans and whimpers as she felt her own little twitches and hitches in her own biorhythm as Polyphylla's began to harmonize with it. *But then, I might not have found you — and I'd wait a thousand thousand Blooms for you if I had to*.

Chapter End Notes

I have been so, so nervous about the writing of this chapter, y'all, but the minute I started it just fell out of my brain like it was meant to be, and isn't that somehow appropriate?

Housekeeping notes: This fic will be getting mirrored (and slightly edited, lol) on AO3 at some point in the near future, but I do plan on finishing it out here, so stay tuned for the epilogue shortly.

ONE CHAPTER REMAINS

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

> In which everything is alright.
>
> Content Warning: Sexual contact between two florets, including genital mention; identity confusion; and arguably gaslighting (but in a good, wholesome, and positive way)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wakefulness came slowly, fuzzy at the fringes. It was less an awakening and more a gradual surfacing, as if a warm tide were pulling away and leaving ~~Cass~~ half-buried in the sand. She became aware first of the weight of her body, then its shape. In fits and starts her surroundings made themselves known to her. She was wearing a tank top, nice and snug, and a pair of loose, lightweight trousers. She was lying on something soft and warm, and what she somehow knew on a bone-deep level was *safe*.

Eyes. She should open her eyes. She had them, she might as well use them. Color and light streamed in as she tentatively blinked. She was in some kind of a forest, the sun casting long shafts of light through the branches overhead, riotous sprays of flora crawling up virtually every surface. Memory tickled at the back of her mind, but she wasn't quite in a place to go rooting around back there just yet -- wakefulness and sensation were still new things, and she hadn't yet exhausted their opportunities.

"Welcome back, little one." It was the warmest, kindest, most beautiful voice in the whole world, and it immediately drew ~~Cass~~'s eyes upward. *Tsuga*. There she was, bark and vines and moss and needles coalesced into a human shape, eyes shining down at her. A wave of love flooded through her, powerful enough to wash away her train of thought for just a moment, and tears gathered in the corners of her eyes.

"H-hi," she whispered, a smile stealing its way onto her face. A massive hand descended onto her head in a long, gentle stroke that set ripples shimmering up and down her neck, and she gasped in pleasure and surprise. *Oh fuck, I'm still high*, she thought, a giggle bubbling up from somewhere deep inside. It felt at once odd and so, so liberating.

"How are you feeling?" With the tenderest touch imaginable, Tsuga scooped ~~Cass~~ up out of her lap (ah, that's where she'd been) and into her arms, squeezing her in an immensely comforting hug. The gentle thrumming from within her perfectly harmonized with the gentle thrumming in the back of ~~Cass~~'s mind, a melody of pure love, delight, relief, and joy.

It took her a moment to catch her breath. "I'm...okay?" Something did feel off, not bad but *off*, like she'd walked into a room and promptly forgotten what she was there to do. Then

again, she was high. She licked her lips -- *fuck*, that felt good, little rippling waves of wet delight -- and looked around. "...Polyphylla's?"

"Mmhmm. Though, there have been some changes. A lot can happen when you're blisteringly high for a few weeks straight." She chuckled and stroked ~~Cass~~'s hair again, another shivering wave of pleasure rocking her body. "We merged our habs. This way, you and Leah don't have to be apart. I can report that she's been absolutely delighted to have you around full-time.

"Leah?" ~~Cass~~ looked around. It was definitely Polyphylla's hab, just as she remembered it. She was, on some level, aware that this should probably trouble her at least a little, but with Tsuga so close at hand, she knew, somehow, that she was safe. Tsuga would never let anything bad happen to her.

Memory slowly caught up to thought: *because I belong to her*. ~~Cass~~ felt a wave of vertigo as she reoriented herself around the idea -- an old rush of revulsion and fear washed out by fresh new waters of excitement and fulfilled longing. *I'm her floret now. I asked her for it.* She looked up at Tsuga, eyes wide, uncertain how to feel, and it was the look in Tsuga's eyes, the resonance that surged within, that decided for her.

"She's having a little routine maintenance right now," Tsuga said, nodding to the doorway of arched trees that led to Polyphylla's office. "She should be up and about soon, and I know she'll be delighted to see you awake too."

~~Cass~~ felt a warmth in her chest at the thought of Leah. Nothing got in the way -- no fears, no frustrations, no distaste, no judgement. All she felt was her love for the other woman, an honest feeling she'd been struggling with now set free. Any moment now, she'd come out, lay eyes on ~~Cass~~, and almost certainly break into a run, excitedly shouting–

Oh fuck. A wave of horror surged up and crowded out all the good feelings and comfort, all the ease and safety. *I can't remember my name!* "What did you do? What did you do to me?!" she cried, staring up at Tsuga. "I can't remember my *name!*"

"Shhh, shhh, calm down, petal," Tsuga purred, stroking ~~Cass~~ gently. Her biorhythms grew louder, unrestrained, and helped to dampen out the fear. "It's not gone, just put away for a little while until you learn to live without all the things tied up with it."

"What do you mean!?" Even through the soothing wash of Tsuga's biorhythms, the insistent but delicate touch in the back of her mind -- *oh God that's the implant* -- she still felt the cold sting of fear.

"You created a persona and lost yourself in it," Tsuga said gently, still stroking ~~Cass~~ in a slow rhythm. "To help you disconnect yourself from that persona, Polyphylla and I placed a block on that one bit of knowledge. It's actually a very complex bit of mnemonic engineering and I don't fully understand the workings of it, but Polyphylla can explain it to you if you like."

~~Cass~~'s heart thudded in her chest. "But you said–"

One enormous finger traced a curve on ~~Cass~~'s cheek, silencing her immediately. "Nothing has been erased, my love, I *promise*. When you've learned to live without the burdens that come with that name, I'll let you remember it. But you *do* have another name, don't you? A name you chose for yourself?"

~~Cass~~ swallowed heavily. "L-Layla," she whispered.

"My Layla," Tsuga purred, her voice thick with pride and reassurance.

It wasn't as if she'd forgotten the name. For many years, privately, she'd still thought of herself as Layla al-Tabari -- certainly, whenever she had to interact with Solstice Administration -- but over the years that name had been buried, used less and less, until she was living as...as whatever she'd called herself out of a fear that using her real name would make it easier for the company to ferret her out. There weren't a hell of a lot of people with Arabic-language surnames on the planet.

It had been years since anyone had called her Layla, and *decades* since anyone she really cared about had done so. It was the name she had chosen, the name she had agonized over for long months with her mother and father's help, and somehow for all its familiarity it still felt strange in her ears, strange to think of herself as Layla.

But knowing that the other name wasn't *gone* helped. She cast her mind back over the last twenty-odd years, methodically searching for any other telltale holes, but the only things she could find weren't *holes*, but *hazes*. What had happened when she'd been captured after she'd blown up the Marama logistics platform? They'd tortured her, they'd...what *had* they done? She'd been treated cruelly and made an example of when she arrived on Solstice... but how? She knew things had happened, but could only recall the vaguest shapes, and not the insistent force of nightmarish pain and heart-pounding anxiety forcing its way into her mind. She shook her head. It wasn't a forgetting so much as a misremembering, and it felt very strange to have the things she'd all but constructed her identity as ~~Cass~~ in response to suddenly slip through her fingers like a fistful of dust.

"...you *promise* you didn't make me forget anything else?" she whispered, clinging to Tsuga.

"Not one thing," Tsuga said, giving ~~Cass~~ a gentle squeeze. "So please don't be worried, my love. I'll take care of everything. Your only job now is to be happy."

"O-okay..." ~~Cass~~ Layla closed her eyes and let herself go limp against Tsuga, feeling the gentle vibrations and the affection they carried with them. One hand drifted up to her neck, and as she felt around she find the thin little strip of scar tissue. *It's really in there*, she thought. *I've got an alien plant inside my spine, inside my brain*.

"Arvense tells me it's grown in beautifully," Tsuga said, her smile obvious to ~~Cass~~ even with her eyes closed. She could *feel* the smile in the back of her head, the implant picking up on her owner's mood. *I make her happy*, ~~Cass~~ thought, and a sense of peace and love blossomed inside her. "We'll go see him later today so he can do a final checkup, just to make sure everything's alright, but I don't expect any surprises."

"Okay," ~~Cass~~ repeated, biting gently on her lip. Now that the tide of fear was ebbing, the warm and gentle feelings were coming back, tickling and rippling with every touch. It felt so strange to think that not long ago, being touched like Tsuga was touching her now would have made her want to crawl out of her skin. Now, she couldn't imagine wanting it to stop. Tsuga had made sure of that, she thought with a sigh of relief.

But wait -- wasn't that supposed to be a frightening thought? ~~Cass~~ Layla thought for a long moment, remembering all the things she'd felt and said before. What was different, besides how she felt? All her memories except one very specific detail were still in place. What had Tsuga really changed? The way her skin felt? That wasn't that critical, was it? And then there was the lack of a voice in the back of her head criticizing her, pointing out faults and flaws, demanding that she push herself harder and harder. Not that it had ever been a *voice* per se, just thoughts, thoughts that forced their way into the front of her mind and refused to let go. Where had they all gone? It was like this before, too, when Tsuga had given her the Class-E. What did that say about her, that she built an effigy of herself out of anxiety and lived inside it for half her life?

No, not half her life. She remembered that feeling from well before she came to Solstice. It was the self-critical urge that insisted she didn't look good enough, that she should try harder first to be more masculine, then to be more feminine, the fear that no one really accepted her for who she was. It was the knowledge, certain and unshakeable, that she wasn't like the others -- didn't think like them, didn't feel like them, didn't behave like them. She had watched all those differences grow and grow and grow, and had done her best to learn from it, to analyze what qualities others had that she lacked, and how to emulate them.

But all of that was gone now. She didn't have to pretend, didn't have to live inside someone else's skin. Tsuga had fixed it. She didn't know how -- it couldn't just be the name, could it? It wasn't just the drugs she was almost certainly on, was it? Was it the implant? Was the implant gently steering those thoughts away from her attention? However it was happening, was this what it felt like to not worry? To not have to analyze everything at all times?

"Am I really yours?" she asked, burying her face into the soft vines of Tsuga's chest.

"All mine," Tsuga whispered back. "All mine."

The tears came then, and ~~Cass~~ couldn't hold them back -- but then, she didn't want to. The love she felt, the relief, was too powerful for any words. Only these tears of joy could give them a voice. She clutched at Tsuga's vines as if to somehow pull herself closer to the Affini, felt them curl possessively around her arms, around her body. Questions still whirled around in her mind, and there was so much she didn't know, didn't understand, about the way she was now, but the one absolute certainty she had was that Tsuga would always be there for her, would never ignore her, would never casually dismiss her, would never abandon her. She was an *Affini*, which meant she got what she wanted, and she wanted to be with ~~Cass~~ Layla.

How long she spent pressed up against Tsuga like that, tangled in her vines and cradled in her arms, she wasn't sure. The comfort came with a timeless quality, like everything else had politely put itself on hold so as not to disturb something so wonderful -- and when something did interrupt, it only made things even better.

It started with a gasp, a soft intake of breath that ~~Cass~~ only barely heard. She opened her eyes and looked to see first Polyphylla, a waterfall of brilliant carmine flowers spilling from her head down her side -- God, was she always so pretty? -- and then Leah, standing at her side and staring up at ~~Cass~~ with the widest smile she'd ever seen on her face. Leah all but shrieked in excitement and bolted over to the sofa, arms outstretched, and before she could even ask for it Tsuga had reached down and helped her up onto the sofa, and then her arms were around ~~Cass~~ Layla and squeezing her as tightly as they could. "You're awake, you're awake!"

"Y-yeah," she said, laughing and wrapping an arm around Leah. "Yeah, I'm back."

"Now, you *do* remember what we talked about, Leah?" Tsuga said, giving Leah a gentle stroke from her head down her back, which made her shiver happily.

"I'm not gonna forget something like my pinnate's *name*, Miss Tsuga!" she said, giggling and burying her face between ~~Cass~~'s neck and shoulder, kissing her way along the collarbone. "Layla Layla Layla Layla~ We match now! Leah and Layla, Layla and Leah, LaylaLeahlalelaylalee~" She dissolved into giggles as her tongue tripped over itself.

"Sorry I was gone for so long," ~~Cass~~ Layla whispered in Leah's ear. Her hair smelled as wonderful as ever, rich and fruity and warm.

"What are you talking about, silly?" Leah looked up at ~~Cass~~ Layla, her pupils wide and black and deep. "You've been here for weeks. I've been cuddling up with you every single day~"

"She has," Tsuga added. "It's been absolutely adorable to watch. I have pictures."

"But now you're awake, so I can do *this!*" She leaned in and kissed ~~Cass~~ Layla, her lips silky-soft, her tongue darting out to find ~~Cass~~ Layla's lips, teeth, and tongue in turn. She made a soft noise of need and pressed her body up against ~~Cass~~ Layla's, her hands seizing fistfuls of tank top as she straddled one of ~~Cass~~ Layla's thighs. She broke the kiss just long enough to whisper, "Okay?"

"Mmm." ~~Cass~~ Layla pushed back in, ever-so-gently taking Leah's lower lip between her teeth as she ran her hands up Leah's thighs and under the brilliantly red sundress she was wearing. Her fingers hooked on the waistband of Leah's panties and tugged them down just a few inches, letting the head of her soft little shaft peek out beneath the dress. Leah whimpered into ~~Cass~~ Layla's mouth as she began to buck, and as she reached down with one hand and slid it into ~~Cass~~ Layla's own waistband.

For a moment, she felt a halting jolt of fear, the memory of skin that once feared skin, but the only sensation that came in the wake of Leah's touch was a warm, gentle ripple that caressed her abdomen, skittering around her ribs and slipping around to leave her ass tingling. She was getting harder now, and Leah's fingers were plunging deeper and deeper, perilously close, now touching it, now stroking it, and ~~Cass~~ Layla let out a loud, uncontrolled moan as her entire body lit up with the amplified and distributed sensations.

And if it felt like her entire body was being stroked, that was perhaps because it *was*. Tsuga's vines were sliding across her, a slow and never-ending caress -- Polyphylla had joined Tsuga on the couch, their vines intermingling, and was doing the same for Leah, sending her

spiraling just the same as Tsuga was doing to ~~Cass~~ Layla. Affirmation poured into her from the whisper-quiet place in the back of her head, stillness and serenity at the heart of a torrent of sexual exhilaration, as she heard both Tsuga and Polyphylla in turn murmur "good girl" into their pets' ears.

Their pets. *Her* pet. ~~Cass~~ Layla was Tsuga's pet. Composure and restraint fell away as she gave herself up to the act of love, lost in wild abandon as she and Leah embraced each other, embraced love without restraint, embraced the freedom to simply *be* with one another however their hearts and their bodies felt best inclined to fit together. The borders between them had been abolished, and the tide of their passion flowed back and forth without any impediment. ~~Cass~~ Layla felt tears sliding once more down her cheeks as she gasped for breath, as she moaned out her need, as her heart sang joyfully, as she and Leah fucked one another in the laps of their owners.

It was a perfect moment, and it left Layla's heart light as a feather.

"No. No. No. Oh definitely not. Hmm... maybe? No. Uuuugh! Fashion is haaaaard!"

~~Cass~~ Layla smiled as she watched Leah swipe through dress after dress after dress on a tablet, the mirrorfall somehow projecting each one onto her reflection's body in realtime -- another technological wonder casually installed in a pet's bedroom, courtesy the Affini. As far as she was concerned, Leah looked lovely in any of the dresses, or for that matter, she thought Leah looked lovely in what she was wearing right now, too, but panties and nothing else didn't qualify as an outfit even at ~~Cass~~ Layla's level of fashion knowledge. The fresh tank top and trousers she'd thrown on after their post-coital bath had taken her all of two minutes. The flowers on the floor of her bedroom were nearly as soft as the bed itself, and ~~Cass~~ Layla was sprawled out across them, idly teasing a bright yellow blossom with one finger and watching it spring back and forth.

With time to think, now that the rush of emotion on awakening had run its course, she could finally appraise her state honestly. She had given up so much to become what she was, to find an escape from the hell she'd created for herself. She'd given up things so important to her that she'd been willing to fight, to kill, and even to die in their name. She belonged, in every way it was possible to belong, to Tsuga. She loved Tsuga, and Tsuga loved her, a truth she knew beyond question. Part of Tsuga's body was inside the implant that had coiled around her spine, had infiltrated her brain, and was even now an active part of her thought process. Every so often, buried in the background thrumming she knew ultimately emanated from Tsuga herself, she thought she could feel a nudge here or there, but maybe it was just her imagination.

(There was the issue of her soul, of course, but that got theologically complicated, and she was very out of practice with thoughts in that avenue.)

And yet, despite it all, her mind felt freer than perhaps it ever had. She wasn't *high*, not really. Her reaction time was slower, and she was more prone to losing herself in sensation than before, but with just a little focus she was able to dig deep through the treasure trove of her memory as easily as she could before -- perhaps with even better clarity. Without tension and anxiety standing like an overeager watchman in her mind, without the fear of slamming into

something she'd rather not remember, it was easier to cast herself back to places and times otherwise forgotten. Without the reflexive need to push herself into a certain shape, it was easier to light upon the little kindnesses she'd forced herself to do without the memory of, to find the good even in times she'd always written off as bad. Her trips down memory lane no longer came with a sign advising that she was walking into an active mine field. That was a liberty that no amount of fighting could have ever afforded her.

She didn't know if what she'd done was *right*, but she knew it felt good, and she knew that, with this as an option, there was no way she could have continued as she was. Part of her, she now recognized, had longed for escape from the life she'd made for herself from the very moment she'd known it was possible -- and part of her, a part now blessedly silent, had been horrified by that impulse, and had burned ever brighter and harder to resist it until it ultimately burned itself out.

Had she abandoned her comrades? Well, in a way, perhaps -- but in another way, she'd simply passed the torch, as she would always have had to do, one way or another. And it wasn't as if she was dead, or her mind carefully engineered into amnesiac security like Leah. She could still help, could still advise, could still be there for the people she cared about. She'd done her bit for the revolution, and the Affini had done theirs. It wasn't the revolution she'd fought for, but it was a revolution that had worked over what could arguably be called geological time. Could she live with that? Was that enough?

"Laylaaaaaa," Leah whined, "you gotta help me pick!"

~~Cass~~ Layla sat up. "What am I going to tell you about dresses that you don't already know?"

"How cute I look in it, obviously!" She pouted and pushed the tablet into ~~Cass~~ Layla's hands. "Come on, come look!"

"Okay, okay," ~~Cass~~ Layla said, laughing and getting to her feet. "So it's between this one and–" She paused as she caught sight of the mirrorfall -- Leah was there of course, one of the dresses on the tablet projected onto her body, but someone else was in the mirrorfall staring back at ~~Cass~~, someone she didn't recognize.

The woman in the mirrorfall looked a lot *like* ~~Cass~~, to be sure: the same dark black hair, thick and wavy, going silver at the temples and pulled back into a loose ponytail to keep it out of the way; the same thick eyebrows that even now were furrowing in confusion, sharp green eyes beneath them staring back at her, the same dark skin that not even three years of winter could lighten. The differences, though, were what stood out, the narrower shoulders, the more rounded jawline, the skin that no longer looked as though it had seen forty-four years of trouble. Everywhere ~~Cass~~'s eyes darted, she expected to find one of the many reasons she did her best to minimize mirror time -- and every time, they failed to find what they were looking for. Her gut reaction to look away failed to materialize, and she simply stared.

The years had fallen off her, and with them so much of what she'd always hated about her body. She could still see the echoes of those things, but they were fading fast, and leaving behind a version of herself that, somehow, didn't hurt to look at.

"Layla?" Leah's touch on her shoulder was feather-light, and sent the gentlest of shivers through ~~Cass~~ Layla's arm. "Are you okay?"

"Huh?" She blinked, turned to look at Leah. "Y-yeah, I'm fine."

"'Cause you're crying, y'know?" She reached up and wiped a tear away from ~~Cass~~'s cheek. "Do you want me to get Miss Tsuga?"

"No, just...wasn't expecting that," ~~Cass~~ Layla said quietly. She glanced back down at the tablet. "Uhm...and to be honest? I don't think I can tell the difference between these dresses, but I bet you'd be cute as hell in either, so I'm just gonna pick at random. Is that okay?"

"Sure!" She giggled, stood on tiptoe, and kissed ~~Cass~~ Layla, the soft touch of lips on lips calling back the memories of earlier. It was so *easy* to remember the good things now. "As long as *you're* okay."

"I'm *very* okay," ~~Cass~~ Layla said, tucking a lock of hair behind Leah's ear and cupping her cheek. "How could I not be? You're here." She gazed down into Leah's eyes without the slightest discomfort, the jet black pools of her pupils seeming to reach out and swallow her. She'd lost herself in Tsuga's eyes many times now, but for the first time she found herself lost in the eyes of a fellow human. How long they stayed that way, how long they simply fed on each other's presence, Layla had no idea -- it was only when they were interrupted that she was able to shake herself free.

"Layla, petal?" It was Tsuga, folding herself almost in half to squeeze herself into the arched branches that formed the door to Leah's bedroom, one arm sweeping the flowering vines out of the way. "It's time to get ready for your checkup."

"Alright," she called back, pausing to give Leah another kiss. "I'll be back in a little while, okay?"

"Okay," Leah said, throwing her arms around ~~Cass~~ Layla and giving her a tight squeeze. "But hurry up. I want aaaaall the Layla time I can get!"

"Yes, ma'am," ~~Cass~~ Layla said, chuckling and returning Leah's hug before breaking away to follow Tsuga. "What do we need to do to get ready, exactly?" Tsuga had pre-compiled a small ready-to-go wardrobe loaded with outfits for her, and while at the time ~~Cass~~ Layla had eyed the dresses hanging in it with suspicion, in light of what she'd seen in the mirrorfall her mind couldn't help but revisit the subject. Maybe they'd look better on her now. Maybe. As a sometimes thing. She still thought she'd look better butch, but it might be worth a shot.

"Well, you're missing something very important," Tsuga said, kneeling down in front of her in the common clearing and reaching inside herself. She produced a thick band of what looked like polished leather, with a ring set in the middle, a thin ribbon of shiny, flexible metal running around the outside, and a pair of metal caps on either end. "This feels like it fits your overall aesthetic, doesn't it?"

~~Cass~~ Layla's heart began to beat just a little bit faster. "Is that...?"

"Your collar," Tsuga purred, stroking ~~Cass~~ Layla's hair with her free hand. "So everyone will know you're mine. See? Look closely." ~~Cass~~ did so, hesitantly, leaning in and examining the collar in detail. There, on the strip of metal, so delicately engraved as to be almost invisible, were words in half a dozen languages. She spotted Affini first, tried to puzzle her way through it, but gave up when she realized the other languages were ones she knew, English, Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish, and more. They all said the same thing: "Layla Sequi, First Floret of Tsuga Sequi."

Though her heart turned over at first, ~~Cass~~ Layla felt a broad smile spreading across her face. *Layla Sequi, First Floret*. That was her name now. The collar was an outward mark of what she already knew: that she belonged to Tsuga. Now her heart was welling up with emotions, and once again they found a way out her eyes and down her cheeks. "Thank you," she whispered, wiping the tears away.

She wanted it. She *wanted* the weight of the collar around her neck. Was this her, or the implant talking? Did it matter anymore? She gasped just a little as Tsuga leaned in and brushed her hair out of the way, shivered as she felt the *click* of the metal caps coming together, bit her lip as the collar settled into place. Tsuga's hands withdrew, and ~~Cass~~ Layla's rose, feeling out the counters of her new, permanent accessory. The rumble in the back of her mind sang a song of deep, abiding love.

"How does that feel?" Tsuga rested her hand on ~~Cass~~ Layla's shoulder, her eyes a snare that drew in her gaze. "Comfortable?"

"Very," ~~Cass~~ Layla whispered.

"Good. Come along, then." A vine slipped into the ring that rested against ~~Cass~~ Layla's collarbone, and with a gentle tug Tsuga coaxed her forward. She took slow steps, so that even with her shorter legs ~~Cass~~ Layla could keep up. Her cheeks flushed as Tsuga led her out of the habitat and into the open air of the ship.

People would see her. People would *see her* like this. They would see ~~Cass~~ Hope being led through the ship on a leash like an animal. She knew this was a thing that would have bothered her before, but now that was only a memory. She was bothered not so much by the thing itself, but by the knowledge that before, it would have bothered her. One hand rested gently on the collar as she followed along at Tsuga's heels, her eyes wandering as she thought it over.

She would have hated this because it was demeaning. It *was* demeaning, wasn't it? For an independent sophont like she had been before, absolutely, but she wasn't an independent sophont anymore. She was a floret. A pet. The collar around her neck said so. The implant whispering in the back of her mind said so. The vine, leading her along with gentle tugs whenever her pace faltered, said so. The love in her heart for the gigantic alien who had made her this way said so. The other Affini who, every so often, would stop the two of them and coo over her, petting her and admiring how cute she was, said so -- as did her own meek acquiescence to the affection.

She was a pet, being led along on a leash by her owner, and she was entirely okay with it, because Tsuga loved her, because she was Tsuga's pet, and this was where she belonged. That

had to be the implant talking, right? But at this point, what did it matter? She'd asked Tsuga for this all on her own, without the implant. This had been her decision, her choice, and she was so grateful to the woman she'd been, to ~~Cass~~, for allowing herself to make that choice. She remembered the anguish, the hurt, the self-punishment. She remembered how hard it had been to choose to become something else. In lieu of giving her past self a hug, she hugged herself in the here and now. ~~Cass~~ had deserved better than she had been given, and now she was getting all that she deserved and more as Layla.

She was still hugging herself when she and Tsuga arrived at Arvense's clinic. Nothing about the place had changed, and yet something *was* different -- there was another terran at the front desk, a young man, clean-shaven and baby-faced, his hair immaculately groomed and framing his face in ruddy-brown waves. He was wearing the loudest Hawaiian shirt that ~~Cass~~ Layla had ever seen, and from the enormous pupils peeking out from under half-lidded eyes, he was clearly high as a kite.

"Hello?" she said, peering at him.

"Oh hhhheeeyyyy ~~Cass~~," he mumbled, and despite the meaningless word he'd said his voice was deeply familiar, one she'd heard hundreds of times echoing off the walls of Bulwark in a loud argument.

"Nikolai?" she said, staring.

"That's my naaaame," he slurred out, grinning and drumming on the desk with his palms. "Don't wear it oouuut, or Master'll hafta compile me a new one~" He immediately cracked up laughing at his own joke. "Ohhh hey, you're here for a vet thing! That means I get to press the Good Times button!" He reached out and mashed his palm against a small button on the desk in the shape of a flower, and a gentle chime sounded from the back of the clinic. It only took a moment for Arvense to emerge.

"Oh, good, good, you're here. And *good boy*, Niko!" His arms were long enough that he didn't even need to lean over to begin ruffling Nikolai's hair. "Very good boy!" His vines snaked under Nikolai's shirt and began to rub and stroke him; Nikolai's eyes rolled and his tongue lolled out of his mouth as he shuddered and twitched, moans cut off by sudden gasps for breath. ~~Cass~~ Layla had a good idea exactly how he felt.

"He's taking to his training very well," Tsuga said, no small note of admiration in her voice.

"Oh, he's *very* trainable, aren't you Niko? Aren't you just the most trainable little terran?" Arvense said, laughing and redoubling his efforts. Nikolai croaked out something that might have been a "Yes, Master," underneath the panting and moaning and shuddering. After a moment, Arvense relented, giving Nikolai a lift out of his chair and onto his feet. "Alright, go ahead and get yourself freshened up, Niko. I'm going to be in back with Layla and Tsuga. Come back out here once you're done, remember?"

"Yyyyes, Master~" Nikolai mumbled through the grin on his face. He stumbled off, down one of the hallways behind the desk.

~~Cass~~ had watched the entire thing outwardly impassive, but inwardly there was a tectonic shift taking place. The last time she'd seen Nikolai, she'd been worried for him, had asked Arvense to make sure he was taken care of -- but why had she been worried? It felt so odd to question her own feelings that way, but he clearly *was* being taken care of. He was happy, and no doubt he felt fulfilled at what he was doing if he was so enthused about pushing what he called the Good Times button, and so she was happy for him. She even smiled a little as Arvense led her and Tsuga back to one of the exam rooms.

Was this adjusting to being a floret, seeing the world through a floret's eyes? Or was this the implant talking?

Was there a difference?

The checkup had been swift as promised -- the implant was growing in perfectly, her scar had healed perfectly, and as Arvense put it, she was a "perfect little floret." The compliment had given her a short rush of elation, even if it confused her a little. He'd given her half a dozen pamphlets to take home with her, with titles like "What's My Implant Doing?" and "Don't Worry, Be Floret," along with a lollipop. The lollipop, he insisted, was mandatory, and wouldn't let her leave until she popped it in her mouth. It *was* delicious, a kind of spicy-sweet flavor somewhere between cherries and cinnamon, and it left her mouth tingling and her mind a little slippery in a way that spoke to a light infusion of xenodrugs. It was a nice surprise. Before, unplanned dosing would have been a matter for concern, but that was before she had the implant gently reminding her that the Affini would never, ever knowingly hurt her.

The next surprise was equally pleasant: when the door to Polyphylla and Tsuga's shared's hab slid open, it wasn't just the usual riot of color that greeted her but a loud chorus of cheers. Her implant acted before the shock could turn to fear or discomfort, a heady feeling rolling through her brain as if she'd just sunk into a soothingly warm bath. The inside of the hab was full of sophonts, she realized as her eyes remembered how to focus, more than a dozen florets with Leah right out front, a big smile on her face as she grabbed ~~Cass~~ Layla's arm and pulled her inside.

It was a party, ~~Cass~~ Layla soon found out, a surprise party that Leah had put together for her to welcome her to the *Tillandsia's* floret community. She saw a few familiar faces, like Cliff and Sascha, who had brought a massive platter of finger sandwiches based on a modified menu from their restaurant, but even more florets she'd never so much as glimpsed before. There were Affini too, dotted around the hab in clumps of three or four, chatting amiably while their pets frolicked at their feet.

There were board games, digital games, improvised games, cuddle-piles, and more than a few corners not-so subtly claimed by couples or trios making out. It was a cacophonous display of sheer delight in every way, shape and form. Yesterday (weeks ago, really, but ~~Cass~~ Layla had missed that time), this would have driven her to distraction, and she'd have fled the place at a dead run, but now somehow the sound wasn't drilling into her ears like it once would have. Was the implant doing that for her?

She ended up being pulled into a board game with Nell, who was wearing precious little save for the vines binding her arms behind her back ("Captain's orders, no hands today," she'd explained). She made a valiant go of manipulating game pieces with her feet, laughing every time she misplaced something or had to try to handle a card with her toes, and ~~Cass~~ Layla laughed along with her. Every so often, Nell would beg her or one of the other players to feed her, another of her Captain's orders, and she'd flush bright red every time, embarrassed and elated all at once.

"I toooold you~" Nell had said through a cackle when they'd first encountered one another. "The great anarchist, a floret. It's too good!"

"Yeah, yeah, get your licks in," Layla had replied, drawing Nell into a hug. "I'm just glad you're happy like this."

"As if there's any other way to be." She'd leaned into the hug, and they'd held one another for a long moment. All the antagonism and discord between them, the meaningless arguments about the role of the individual in the revolution, were a thing of the past. All that was left was the friendship that had kindled beneath those arguments, the friendship that was now free to breathe at last.

The Captain was there, too. ~~Cass~~ Layla's distrust of and fear for em had all but vanished, replaced with a kind of quiet awe, even as e knelt down to speak to her alone after the game had wound up. "Look at you," e said. "I'm so, so glad to see you like this."

"Really?"

"I knew from the moment I first saw you that you needed this, my dear Layla," e said, ruffling her hair amiably. She sighed happily and leaned into the touch. "I have a lot of experience with terrans who are hurting, and I know the signs, and you, my dear, you were hurting. And do you know what?" E leaned in close and whispered, "So was Tsuga, and you've helped her just as she's helped you. You two are good for each other. I know and you know that she's always going to take care of you, but you take care of her too, understood?"

"Yes, Captain," Layla said. "I will."

"Good girl~" E gave her one last hair-tousle and left her there in the afterglow of affirmation. She knew exactly what the Captain meant, had known it even before she was domesticated, how she had helped Tsuga to grow beyond the ancient hurts holding her back. It made her heart swell and her eyes tear up to think that she could be something that good for her owner, her owner who loved her so much.

That was when the absolute knockout in the green dress had arrived, or at least, when Layla first noticed her. She met Layla's eyes from across the room, her flaming red hair spilling down her shoulders and hiding half her face. It reminded her of Polyphylla's cascade of red blossoms. It was only when the red-haired woman approached her, swept the hair back from her face, and said, "I didn't believe it, but here you are," that ~~Cass~~ Layla was able to place her.

"...Aletheia? God, I didn't recognize you," she said, grinning a little dopily. The party might have been starting to get to her, if only through the medium of her implant regularly dosing

her to keep any anxieties at bay.

Her eyes lit up. "Really?" she said excitedly, and made a little movement somewhere between a dance and a happily little squirm.

"You look amazing," ~~Cass~~ Layla said, looking her up and down with rather less subtlety than she intended to. Her curves were filling out, her face had softened, and her hair had gone from a curly mop to a long and wavy sheet that looked impossibly soft.

"You look really good too," Aletheia said. "Hey, I'm sorry I was super out of it when you were feeling bad," she added. "Mistress had me ramping up for my implant, so there wasn't a lot I could do about it. Then I woke up after and found out *you* were getting an implant too and, well..." She grinned and hugged ~~Cass~~ Layla. "I guess it's not what I expected, but I'm happy for you. For you and for Leah."

~~Cass~~ Layla returned the hug without hesitation. Even if Aletheia was smaller, there was a weight to her, a presence she hadn't had before, and it felt so good to have it up against her body. "Thank you," she whispered. "It... wasn't easy, but I'm okay. I'm through it now." She reached up to touch her collar, her fingers sliding against the cool metal strip and feeling each individual letter one by one. "I'm where I belong."

"Good," Aletheia said. "But...am I where *I* belong?" She met ~~Cass~~ Layla's eyes, lip firmly locked between her pearl-white teeth, and ~~Cass~~ Layla saw in her a need that time had not abated. It was a familiar look to her now, the sign of something she felt within herself as well. ~~Cass~~ would never have entertained what came next, but Layla had nothing to hold her back. Aletheia's lips were soft, yet became firm and commanding as the kiss went on. One of her hands reached up to cradle Layla's cheek as she took the lead in the kiss, her tongue probing gently into Layla's open mouth. If Tsuga had led her on a leash before, Aletheia led her now, and she gave herself to the moment just the same.

Was this the start of something new? Layla hoped so. After all, Leah had a half-dozen other girlfriends. (She wasn't entirely sure that Aletheia wasn't already one of them, in fact.) It would balance things nicely for her to do the same. She deserved good things, and she deserved to be loved -- and she was, and she would be. That was what it meant to be a floret.

The party was wonderful, but it was also much more than Layla had been prepared for. She'd ended up plastered across Tsuga's thighs on the sofa as the implant medicated her more and more. So much, alas, for the guest of honor, but everyone took it in good cheer and made sure to come by to pet her while she lazed there half-aware, and that was a lovely feeling. Even after the party wound down, Affini and florets slowly filtering out, she stayed there, exulting in the touch of her owner and the feeling of absolute safety it brought.

The artificial sky above the flowering branches was turning shades of pale pink and purple when her head finally cleared, and she sat up blinking as her mind slowly reassembled the last few hours into a coherent memory. "Oh... party's over?"

"Mmmhmmm," Tsuga said, stroking Layla with a heavy vine while she tapped away at her tablet above. "How are you feeling?"

"Good," Layla said, sighing happily and rolling over to lean against Tsuga's torso. The rumbling within matched the rumbling inside her perfectly. "Thank you."

"Oh, it wasn't my idea," Tsuga said, "but when Leah brought it up to me, I thought it was a wonderful one. Did you have a good time?"

"Mmmhmmm." She closed her eyes and let the world spin gently around her. "It was a lot, but... a nice a lot."

"I'm glad to hear that. I know today has brought a lot of changes all at once for you, but you're adapting beautifully." The pride in her voice was almost too much for Layla. She let her mind roll back over the day's events -- even the bits that were hazy felt good and warm and safe. There was one thing that bubbled up, though, that made its way to her mouth in the form of a question.

"Are you and Polyphylla... I don't know, is there an Affini-specific word for 'couple?' I'm sorry if that's off-base, I just felt something from you earlier, and–"

"No apologies," Tsuga said, giving her long, gentle stroke. "And yes, you're right, we are. Well spotted." She chucked and gave Layla a gentle squeeze. "Does that worry you? I know you and her had a bit of friction before."

~~Cass~~ Layla paused in thought for a moment, held in place by Tsuga's hands and vines. She remembered everything that had happened during her wardship with crystal clarity, remembered the frustration, the anger, the feeling of powerlessness. Polyphylla *had* upset her, but that upset was in the past. Tsuga wouldn't live with Polyphylla, wouldn't be in whatever the Affini version of a romantic relationship was, if it was bad for Layla. "I'm *yours*," she asked, "not *both of yours*, right?"

"Exactly. You and Leah are Layla Sequi and Leah Aptenia, First Florets pinnate," Tsuga said, giving Layla a gentle pat on the head. Such a small gesture, and yet it meant the world to Layla, a thrill of affirmation. "Now, if Polyphylla tells you to do something, you listen, but anything big, anything important, I'll be the one making the decision for you, just as she would for Leah."

Layla nodded. "Okay." Nothing bad would happen. Tsuga would always be here for her. And besides, she knew Polyphylla didn't hate her or anything -- she just didn't *get* her. Now that the two of them were living together, and she had Tsuga to back her up, they could figure it out together.

"Good, good. Now, are you feeling clear-headed enough for some big news?"

"I think so," Layla said, stretching and taking a deep breath and trying to clear her head. Her implant played along, and she felt a cool clarity slowly make its way through her. "Yeah, I think I'm okay. Why?"

"Well, once we made things official, I took it upon myself to do a little bureaucratic digging on your behalf. Specifically, I got in touch with Xenoveterinary Archeobureaucracy on Terra and asked them to try to track down a few people -- and I'm very happy to report that they

were successful." She held her enormous tablet out so Layla could see it and tapped on what looked like one bit of email in a long inbox. It expanded into a video of a familiar room with sunlight peeking in through narrow windows and an older woman -- in her 60s or maybe her 70s -- sitting on a tattered old sofa, the bright red Layla remembered from her childhood long since faded.

And then the woman started speaking, and though her voice creaked with age no small amount, Layla recognized her at once. "Auntie Ashtî?" she whispered, too stunned to properly listen. When her brain finally caught up with her watery eyes and began to actually parse the Kurdish, she'd already missed the first few sentences.

"I'm so glad to hear you're alright, kiddo," she was saying, a big smile on her face. "We didn't hear much about Solstice, but what I did hear told me you had to be in the thick of it. Reading between the lines of bullshit, remember?" She leaned forward just a little. "Your mother would be so, so proud of you. I know your father was. And I've *always* been proud of you."

There was more, so much more, but Layla barely heard it. She had to watch it three times, crying all the while, to catch the details -- how Ashtî had gone to ground for five years after Marama, how after the heat had died down she'd made her way back to Zerqamîsh and had looked after her father for the last years of his life, how the Affini had already reduced the average outdoor temperature around the city by five degrees. There was so much, and yet it was scarcely enough. She wept, clinging to Tsuga, as she unburdened herself of ancient strata of emotion long buried.

And Tsuga held her the entire time, never wavering, never hurrying her along. The harmony of her natural biorhythm and the mirror of it inside Layla's head blanketed her in a soothing, loving presence, and what might have been an uncontrolled spiralling meltdown instead became a cathartic release. As the tears tapered off, and as she became aware of Tsuga's slow, gentle petting, she finally got her breathing under control enough to ask something she never once thought she'd say: "Can we go back?"

"To Terra?" Tsuga smiled, and the relief that single gesture carried was almost too much for Layla. "Flower, I've already started making the arrangements. I think it's for the best if you have a couple of days to grow accustomed to conscious life with your implant, to ground yourself a little, but after that, you and me and Polyphylla and Leah will all take a little trip."

She almost began crying again, but managed to hold in the tears if not the emotion in her voice. "Thank you. Thank you! Thank you for everything," she croaked out, looking up at Tsuga with nothing less than total love in her eyes.

"Layla, my petal, it's my pleasure. And, I'll admit, I'm also a little curious how the ecological reconstruction process is going," she added with a wink.

Layla couldn't help but snicker. "When did you become so suave, huh?"

"I may have been observing the Captain's mannerisms. Just a little."

"It looks good on you," Layla said, closing her eyes and leaning into Tsuga with a deep sigh of relief. She *was* good for Tsuga, just like the Captain had said, as good for Tsuga as Tsuga

was for her. Apart, they were perhaps the most hopeless members of their respective species imaginable, but together, they just *fit*, and everything *worked*. They were together now, and would always be together. How was she so lucky, to have met the perfect Affini the instant they arrived on Solstice? And how foolish had she been to try to deny this to herself, let alone to others?

That thought stayed with her, through the cuddle session and into the evening, all through a dinner and all through the bath that came after -- one she happily shared with Leah, her implant secreting the counteragent to the Class-A shampoo so that all she felt was a gentle tingling as it was rinsed off into the water. It wasn't an unpleasant thought, wasn't guilt or unhappiness, but something to mull over slowly.

Her notes. Her grand plan for human freedom. In hindsight it all seemed a little like spitting into the wind, pointless and likely to backfire. On some level, Layla had always known that, but it wasn't in her nature to just lie down and give up. Even now, as a floret, that just wasn't who she was. Becoming Tsuga's pet hadn't been *giving in*, it had been a choice. In theory, her last, but she knew Tsuga liked her independent. She had room to maneuver, still, and leaving things unfinished was not her style.

But her notes were incomplete, she realized. She thought she'd finished them that day, the day that she finally, blessedly begged Tsuga to domesticate her, but in hindsight she'd only written down half of what needed to be said. She'd spent so much time and effort on how to avoid domestication, how to toe the line of feralism to keep the ember of freedom alive, and yet she'd spent so little time on how to *live* with the Affini, how to accept that their presence wasn't inherently negative, how to love and be loved by them without losing yourself to it. The simple truth was, her notes lacked the perspective she now had as a floret. She had seen both sides of the equation, and was still lucid enough to describe how that equation was balanced.

So she would. She would revise her notes, and add onto them, and when they were ready, she would hand them off, to Raeburn or to Trish or to whoever she felt was best suited to the task. She really should get in touch with them, she realized. She hadn't said anything to them before she went under, and she should really let them know she wasn't permanently tripping on xenodrugs like a lot of florets were. She might not necessarily be the same as she had been before, but she was still *her*, a better version of her, a Layla who didn't hurt all the time, who didn't need to hide that hurt under a layer of cool bravado and competence.

She could still be there for them, and she wanted to be, because she loved them. It all came down to love, in the end.

But that would come tomorrow, and the days ahead, after her trip back to the homeworld to hug the closest thing she had to family from her old life. Now, she was slipping into a long nightshirt, admiring herself in Leah's mirrorfall and not hating what she saw -- *someday soon*, she thought, *I'll give one of those dresses a spin*. Now, she was hugging Leah, her face buried in her sweet-smelling hair; now, she was kissing her, her hands sliding down her body in slow, uninhibited exploration. Now, she was being lifted into bed by her owner, warm and soft vines ensnaring her in a blissful cuddle. Some of those vines were Polyphylla's, and she didn't care -- she knew Polyphylla loved her, too. What had gone before was just a series of

mistakes, miscommunications, misunderstandings, unfortunate but a thing of the past. Now, a new chapter in her life was beginning. The two Affini let themselves intermingle, let their vines tangle around their two florets, cocooning them together in a perfect spoon. Layla had never been so comfortable as she was in that moment, with Leah cuddled up in her arms.

Sleep began to catch up with her. The day had been long and very, very busy, but it had also been the best day of Layla's life. No doubt the days to come would be busy, too -- she wasn't the sort to stay idle, not even as a beloved pet -- but no doubt, too, that they would be even happier.

Chapter End Notes

Well... that's it. It's done.

I want to thank everyone who has been reading along and especially everyone who left comments. I didn't respond often because I'm extremely self-conscious about comment sections, but all your comments were a big part of what fueled me throughout this process. I've never written a novel serially like this before (and, at 175k+ words, this is definitely a novel!), and I wasn't sure I'd be able to push all the way through when I started, but with your help I got there. Thank you for coming along on this journey with me!

If you'd like to know more about Human Domestication Guide, or just chat with authors and other folks interested in the setting, come check out the HDG Community Discord!

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